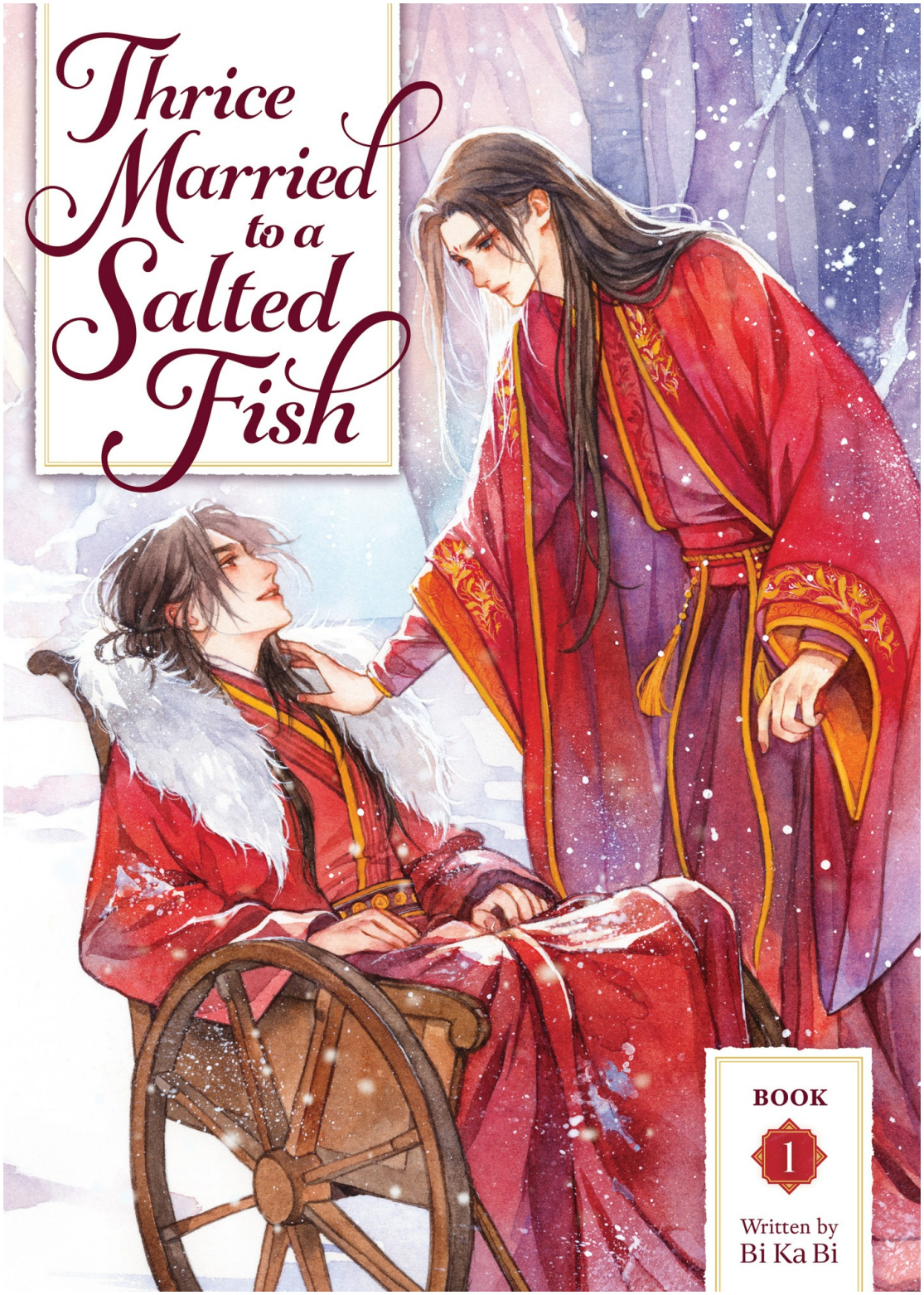
Thrice Married to a Salted Fish
BOOK
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Written by
Bi Ka Bi

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THRICE MARRIED TO A SALTED FISH (NOVEL

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TRANSLATION: Mimi, Huayu, Eli
ADAPTATION: Monica Sullivan
LOGO DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
COVER DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
COPY EDITOR: Amanda Eyer
PROOFREADER: Lexy Lee, Imogen Vale
EDITOR: Heather Wychbold
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Mal
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Chapter 1

A WEDDING NIGHT was taking place at the marquess of Nan'an's manor.

Two matrons of honor had been tasked with assisting the bride on the wedding night. When they finished their work, the matrons led the maids out of the inner rooms of the marquess's manor. Before the women even stepped out the door, they were whispering to each other frantically.

"I've never seen such a beautiful man."

"Ah, what a pity that he's married to an invalid."

"What is there to pity? He's the young lord of the marquess's manor now. If it weren't for the man's bazi, which could bring fortune to their heir, would the marquess and marchioness be interested in the son of the head imperial physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians—the son of a fifth-rank official?"

"Good point. Only time will tell whether this is a blessing or a curse."

As they conversed, the bride's matrons of honor came to the outer room and glanced inside, then closed the doors. Among the festive red decorations was the newly married young lord, wearing a bridal veil over his head. He looked like a jade sculpture as he sat silently on the wedding bed.

The doors slowly closed, leaving only the newlyweds in the room.

Everything went quiet. Lin Qingyu's back, which he'd had stiffened for an entire day, finally relaxed. He shifted a bit, the tassels from his veil swaying with the movement.

Wearing a veil was so uncomfortable. When a woman got married, her husband was supposed to remove her veil—presumably, the same went for a man.

But *his* husband might not be able to do that.

His…"husband."

Lin Qingyu took the veil off himself, which finally widened his field of vision. He looked around at the mesh curtains, red drapes, and bedding. Finally, he turned his gaze to the sleeping man on the bed—Lu Wancheng, heir to the marquess of Nan'an's estate.

In the candlelight, Lin Qingyu studied him expressionlessly.

Lu Wancheng was dressed in bright-red wedding robes, but his eyes were as dark as the faraway mountains. His eyelashes were long, his cheekbones were defined, and his lips were as pale as paper. Even though his eyes were shut, and he looked weak and feeble, he was still clearly handsome.

From now on, this man would be Lin Qingyu's husband.

Lin Qingyu had become a man's wife, even though he was a man himself. He was the first male wife in the Great Yu Empire to be legitimately married.

Hilarious, really.

Lin Qingyu had been preparing for the Imperial Academy of Medicine's entrance examination for three years now. If he passed, he could become a medical

official like his father. Even if he didn't join the palace's personnel, he could still open an apothecary in the capital and be an ordinary physician.

Unfortunately, right when his plans were about to come to fruition, the empress had summoned his father and said, "I heard that you have a son born in the chen hour[1] on the eleventh day of the third month of the guiwei[2] year. Is that true?"

After his father confirmed it, the empress asked the emperor to permit a member of the Lin family to marry, betrothing Lin Qingyu to Lu Wancheng, the marquess of Nan'an's eldest son.

The officials in the capital knew very well that Lu Wancheng had been born sickly, and that he'd been bedridden for many years. Upon his birth, the marquess of Nan'an had invited an imperial physician to examine the infant. The physician confirmed that Lu Wancheng wouldn't survive past the age of twenty.

Lu Wancheng was already nineteen this year, and his health worsened by the day. Seeing him waste away, approaching the end of his life, the marquess of Nan'an could only write a letter pleading for help from the Great Yu Empire's imperial preceptor, who was rumored to understand the world, ghosts, and the gods. The imperial preceptor's reply only contained one line—a bazi. *The chen hour on the eleventh day of the third month of the guiwei year.*

Disobeying the emperor's orders was a crime punishable by death. Lin Qingyu wouldn't have regretted dying alone, but he needed to protect his aging parents and younger brother. Thus, he became Lu Wancheng's wife for the sake of warding off his bridegroom's sickness.

Over a decade of intense studying had became nothing more than a joke.

The night was growing late, and the maid standing watch outside told Lin Qingyu, "Young Lord, it's time to serve the young marquess in bed."

Lin Qingyu clenched his fist toward his sleeping husband. Him, serve Lu Wancheng? Was she joking?

The rules of noble marriage had always been onerous. Though this wedding had been rushed, the marquess of Nan'an had sent an etiquette instructress to the Lin manor to teach what Lin Qingyu called "the ways of a male wife." Before the wedding, they washed his whole body inside and out and even smeared something like grease on him.

Lin Qingyu was not homosexual and had never suffered such humiliation. If it weren't for his wish to protect dozens of members of the Lin family, he would rather have died along with Lu Wancheng.

Seeing no movement in the bridal chamber, the maid urged him, "Young Lord, it's time for bed."

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes and suppressed the malice rising within him. He blew out all the candles except for a single red one at the foot of the bed.

Lu Wancheng lay atop the quilt, still wearing his luxurious wedding robes. Sleeping like that was probably uncomfortable.

But what did that have to do with Lin Qingyu? He hoped Lu Wancheng would never wake up.

As Lin Qingyu walked to the side of the bed, his eyes fell on Lu Wancheng's hands, which lay crossed over his chest.

The Lins were a medical family—Lin Qingyu had studied medicine with his father since childhood. When still young, he'd left home to learn from renowned teachers, and his medical techniques far exceeded those of his peers. He knew just by looking at Lu Wancheng's face that the man was beyond cure. He must have been suffering from a serious chronic illness.

To confirm that suspicion, Lin Qingyu deigned to feel the ill man's pulse. Lu Wancheng's wrist felt frighteningly cold, as if it had just been taken out of cold water.

It was essentially as Lin Qingyu had guessed—Lu Wancheng's vitality was exhausted, and he was on the verge of death. Unless a miraculous physician reincarnated into this world, Lu Wancheng wouldn't survive longer than six months.

That meant Lu Wancheng's bride would only have to deal with this for half a year. When the young nobleman succumbed to his illness, Lin Qingyu would be free.

As he took the ill man's pulse, Lin Qingyu unconsciously exerted some force, leaving two shallow marks on Lu Wancheng's wrist.

Suddenly, Lu Wancheng's deathly pale fingers moved.

Lin Qingyu instinctively let go of his hand, and it fell back onto the bed. His eyes rolled beneath his closed eyelids, his long eyelashes fluttering.

Was Lu Wancheng about to wake up?

Lin Qingyu's expression was grave as he stared at Lu Wancheng unblinkingly. Under his bride's sharp gaze, Lu Wancheng slowly opened his eyes.

Lu Wancheng's vision seemed covered with a layer of fog; he seemingly couldn't see clearly. Even when the cloudiness apparently dissipated, he seemed confused.

"Huh…? Where did this beauty reminiscent of the ancient times come from…?" the sickly man asked.

Ugh. What a pervert. Lu Wancheng was almost on his deathbed, but he still remembered to call Lin Qingyu a beauty.

"You're awake?" Lin Qingyu responded coldly.

Lu Wancheng seemed dazed for a moment. Then he asked hoarsely, "Who are you?"

Surprise flashed in Lin Qingyu's eyes. "You don't know who I am?"

It *was* the first time they'd met in person. Still, if Lu Wancheng had a brain, he would've understood as soon as he saw the wedding robes on Lin Qingyu's body.

Lu Wancheng shook his head, coughed twice, and said, "It's a bit clichéd, but I still want to ask… Where am I, and what am I doing here?"

Lin Qingyu didn't reply. Was this invalid so sick that it had made him stupid, or did he not know about the marriage at all?

Before the wedding, Lin Qingyu had heard his father mention Lu Wancheng's illness. It was said that he'd been in a stupor, delirious, for the past month. If that was the case, Lu Wancheng might actually be unaware of the marriage.

Lin Qingyu's expression softened. "My family name is Lin, and my given name is Qingyu."

“Lin Qingyu? Lin…Qing…yu…” Lu Wancheng repeated, as if he’d remembered something. “The beautiful imperial physician who died in the Eastern Palace?”

Lin Qingyu frowned. “What?”

Lu Wancheng stared at him unblinkingly, his expression startled, then suddenly struggled to get up.

Out of professional habit, Lin Qingyu pressed him back down. “What are you doing?”

“The mirror.” Covering his chest with one hand, Lu Wancheng pointed with the other toward the bronze mirror on the cabinet, his hair flowing across the pillow. He coughed. “Hand me the mirror.”

Mirror?

Lin Qingyu did so, asking, “Is something wrong with it?”

When Lu Wancheng saw himself in the mirror, his eyes widened as if he’d seen a ghost. His expression held a thousand words, but after a moment of breathless hesitation, he only uttered one: “…Fuck.”

The maid on night watch heard the commotion inside the room and knocked, asking, “Young Lord, has something happened?”

Lin Qingyu glanced at Lu Wancheng, who looked as if he’d been struck by lightning, then calmly said, “Tell the marquess and his wife that the young master is awake.”

The maid immediately sent someone to report that news to the marquess and marchioness of Nan’an, then summoned a physician. Soon after, the bridal chamber filled with people; Lin Qingyu stood like an outsider at the edge of the room.

Physician Zhang—who wasn’t an imperial physician, but was renowned in the capital—felt Lu Wancheng’s pulse. He stroked his beard, saying incredulously, “I have practiced medicine for decades, but this is the first time I’ve seen such a development.”

“Physician Zhang,” the marchioness said anxiously, “is Wan-cheng…?”

“Don’t worry, Lady. The young marquess awakening was fortuitous. But his pulse… I took it just yesterday. It was weak, and he wasn’t far from death, but now it’s like he’s a different person.” Physician Zhang clicked his tongue in wonder. “It’s miraculous—as if new life was breathed into him.”

Lin Qingyu mulled that over silently. Strangely enough, Lu Wancheng had suddenly gotten better, and it wasn’t the surge before death. He’d never seen anything like it in the medical literature.

The marchioness paused before asking, “Is he going to get well, then?”

The physician didn’t dare promise too much. Instead he said, “He at least has a sliver of hope now.”

This moved the marchioness to tears. “Good, good… Wancheng, did you hear that? You’re getting better.”

But Lu Wancheng didn’t react much. “I heard him.”

“Marchioness, the young marquess just awoke,” the physician told her. “He still needs rest.”

The marchioness wiped her tears. “Then I won’t disturb you any longer, Wancheng. Where’s Qingyu? Where did the young lord go?”

Everyone looked around, and Lin Qingyu stepped forward. “Marchioness?”

The marchioness held his hand in her own and smiled. “Qingyu, Wancheng’s illness improved as soon as you married into our family. The imperial preceptor is truly miraculous; you are Wancheng’s savior. In the future, he will be under your care.”

Lu Wancheng raised his head to look at Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu had something of a smile on his face. “Don’t worry, Lady. I’ll take good care of the young marquess.”

“Ah, don’t call him ‘the young marquess’ like we do, Young Lord,” the auntie beside the marchioness teased. “You should call him ‘my husband.’”

Everyone laughed, not noticing Lin Qingyu’s fists clenching in the sleeves of his wedding robes. Then the crowd dispersed, and the bridal quarters found peace again. The red candle was about to burn out.

Lu Wancheng lay on the bed silently. His brow tightened occasionally, as if he was trying to remember something.

Lin Qingyu couldn’t be bothered to pay attention to him. He stood next to the window, staring at the unfamiliar moonlight outside as it spilled onto his body.

After a while, Lu Wancheng heaved a long sigh. “Brothe—wait, no. Beautiful, come here.”

“Who are you talking to?” Lin Qingyu asked coldly.

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Is anyone else here?”

Lin Qingyu turned around, the flickering candlelight flushing his cheeks with a hint of crimson. The teardrop mole at the corner of his eye looked even more charming in that light—as much so as a peony blossom.

The man was beautiful—but seemed short-tempered.

Lu Wancheng coughed a couple of times, then gestured for Lin Qingyu to sit. Lin Qingyu simply stood next to the bed, however, staying an arm’s length from Lu Wancheng.

“I was just thinking through things,” Lu Wancheng said. His tone was calm, a stark contrast from his flustered demeanor when he’d just woken up.

“What you were thinking about has nothing to do with me,” Lin Qingyu said neutrally.

“It does, a little—because I was thinking about you.” After speaking only a couple of sentences, Lu Wancheng already looked exhausted and pale. “If I’d come to a few days earlier, I wouldn’t have agreed to this marriage—to you becoming a widow after taking care of me.”

Lin Qingyu felt numb. “What’s the use of saying this now?”

“You’re right. Now that we’re married, and we’ve even prostrated ourselves to heaven and earth, the whole capital knows that we’re husband and wife.”

Lin Qingyu sneered. “No.”

“Huh?”

“We didn’t prostrate ourselves to heaven and earth,” Lin Qingyu taunted. “You were unconscious the whole time, so I knelt alongside a rooster.”

“They had you do that?” Lu Wancheng scoffed. “Forget it. Well, it’s fine that I didn’t kneel. You don’t have to take the marriage seriously. I won’t live more than half a year, so you’ll just have to bear with me for a bit. After I’m dead, you can take your inheritance from me back to the Lin residence and be free. It’s not too bad.”

Lin Qingyu was surprised. Suspicious, he asked, “You’ll make such a generous deal?”

“Yes. But how much you bring home is up to you,” Lu Wancheng said in a relaxed tone as he leaned against a soft pillow. “I’m not going to fight over your inheritance with this weak body of mine. The waters of this manor are too deep—I can’t control the tide. I just want to muddle along and lie around like a salted fish.”

Chapter 2

LIN QINGYU HADN'T quite understood what Lu Wancheng said, yet he'd roughly grasped the meaning. Lu Wancheng had mentioned his impending death so casually—was he really not afraid of dying?

Lu Wancheng had already exhausted himself; in the end, he was still sick. He reclined on the bed, saying, "Beautiful, you…"

"*What* are you calling me?" Lin Qingyu asked sternly.

While attending school, Lin Qingyu had often been harassed by perverts. When somebody called him "Beautiful" or "Darling" on a whim, he'd wanted only to take out a self-made toxin that could shut people up and shove it down their throats.

Still, though Lu Wancheng called him "Beautiful," he didn't leer like a fool. So he wasn't entirely incorrigible.

"How fierce you are. Not happy that I praised your beauty?" Lu Wancheng asked, his eyes closed. "Fine. I need to rest, so do as you please."

After the day's events, it was already past midnight. There was nothing else to do but go to bed.

Earlier, a maid had helped Lu Wancheng take off his wedding robes and had wiped his hands and face. Lin Qingyu, however, still wore his robes and headdress from the wedding ceremony, his huadian and other makeup still on his face.

Yes, he'd put makeup on—though, after repeated protests, the matron of honor had only drawn in his eyebrows and added color to his lips. Lin Qingyu's face was naturally alluring yet aloof, and after she'd finished, his lips were red as flames and his eyebrows were as pretty as could be. Others lavished him with praise, but the cosmetics frightened him. It seemed as if what had been set between his lips wasn't rouge paper, but instead a shackle that chained him down, a shackle placed by the marquess's entire household…and the imperial family.

Lin Qingyu would remember this. He would also remember the matron of honor who'd insisted that he use an ointment that made a certain part of his body uncomfortable.

As for the "husband" Lin Qingyu was leaving in the dark… If what Lu Wancheng said was true—that the next six months would pass uneventfully, and that they were husband and wife in name only—Lin Qingyu could almost put this grudge behind him.

Lu Wancheng was merely a dying man. Why bother with him?

There obviously weren't two beds in the bridal chamber, and Lu Wancheng occupied the only one available, so Lin Qingyu decided to spend the night on a soft divan.

But the Lantern Festival had just passed, and the weather wasn't yet warm, so he would no doubt catch cold if he simply slept on the divan uncovered. He noticed an extra quilt on the wedding bed—most likely specially prepared because the manor's servants feared that their precious young marquess wouldn't be used to sharing a bed.

In light of that, Lin Qingyu wouldn't bother being polite.

In his sleep, Lu Wancheng still couldn't escape the pain of illness; his brow was slightly furrowed. Although Lin Qingyu took the quilt gently, Lu Wancheng still woke up.

When he opened his eyes, Lin Qingyu was bent over him, his hair hanging in front of his chest and tickling Lu Wancheng's cheek a bit.

Their eyes met, and before Lu Wancheng could say anything, Lin Qingyu told him, "I'm taking a quilt."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "Go ahead."

Lin Qingyu carried the quilt over to the divan and spread it out. Just when he was about to lie down, Lu Wancheng asked, "Don't you take your clothes off when you sleep?"

Though a male wife's robes weren't as complicated or restrictive as a female wife's, they still consisted of several layers of loose garments and a belt—far more inconvenient and uncomfortable than normal clothing. Lu Wancheng felt tired just looking at his bride.

"Of course I do," Lin Qingyu said steadily.

He turned and lifted his hand to undo the outermost layer of knot buttons, letting the outer robe fall to his ankles. A moment later, he wore only a single layer of nightclothes, just like Lu Wancheng.

After undressing, he turned back and looked at the wedding bed—Lu Wancheng was asleep again. Good.

***

The next morning, Lu Wancheng's light cough woke Lin Qingyu up, since he was a light sleeper. Lu Wancheng lay on his side on the wedding bed, his long, black hair mostly covering his face; his posture was casual and relaxed.

Lin Qingyu had just gotten up from the soft divan when a knock came at the door.

"Young Master, Young Lord, it's time to get up. According to tradition, you need to serve tea to the marquess and marchioness later."

Lu Wancheng showed no sign of awakening.

Lin Qingyu opened the door and let in the maids. The one in front was Fengqin, Lu Wancheng's personal servant. She carried in hot water; when she noticed the quilt on the divan, her face twitched.

Half the maids who'd entered helped Lin Qingyu wash and dress, while the other half roused Lu Wancheng. Lin Qingyu changed into a snow-blue robe and put his hair into a simple updo with a jade ornament. These normal men's robes still looked elegant on him, but they were less colorful and more dignified than his attire the night before.

Fengqin wanted to put makeup on him. "No need," he told her.

"But I saw you wearing it yesterday, Young Lord."

"As you said, *yesterday*." Lin Qingyu's gaze swept over the trousseau on the table. "Take all these things away," he said, irritated.

He'd finished dressing, yet Lu Wancheng was still asleep. A couple of maids flanked the bed, calling out to him softly.

"Young Master, you and the Young Lord should serve tea to the marquess and marchioness."

"Young Master…"

Lu Wancheng didn't move, his expression peaceful. His hands remained clasped over his chest like those of a Buddha statue.

"Did the young marquess pass out again?" Fengqin asked anxiously.

Lin Qingyu went up to Lu Wancheng and carefully examined him. "No. He's just sound asleep. You can simply force him awake."

"What do you mean, 'force' him awake?" Fengqin asked.

"Raise your voice or lift his quilt," he replied. "But don't forget that he's still ill. Don't disturb his rest unless you want to worsen his condition."

Fengqin looked chagrined. "But the marquess and marchioness—"

Lin Qingyu interrupted her. "You want him to serve tea despite being this sick? Is tradition more important than his life?" In the Great Yu Empire, newlyweds served tea to their parents the day after the ceremony—so if Lu Wancheng didn't have to go, then Lin Qingyu probably wouldn't have to either.

Before the empress set the wedding in motion, the marchioness of Nan'an—Lady Liang—had sent someone over to propose a marriage between the Lin and Lu families. Lin Qingyu decisively refused, however. Only then did Lady Liang ask the empress for help, thus placing the Lin family in a position where they could only marry Lin Qingyu off or die. Lin Qingyu didn't want to pay the marquess and marchioness any attention at all, let alone treat them as his in-laws.

Fengqin didn't dare make the decision on her own, so she sent a maid to report the situation to Lady Liang. Shortly after, the auntie who served Lady Liang came to say, "The marchioness says the young master rarely sleeps well, so let him sleep. Drinking the young lord's tea will be sufficient for her and the marquess."

Lin Qingyu sneered. "As I thought, the lady loves her son as much as her own life."

He had to follow orders in the marquess's manor. However unwilling he felt, he could only put on his winter cloak and follow the auntie to the front hall.

On the way there, the auntie rambled, listing the rules of the manor's inner chambers. Lin Qingyu didn't bother listening, zoning out. Yesterday, he had worn a bridal veil and could only see a few steps in front of his feet. Today, he finally saw what the marquess's manor looked like. Though Lin Qingyu had never entered the palace, he'd once visited the prince's manor with his father for consultations. The opulence of the marquess's manor was comparable; it had exquisitely dignified carved beams and painted rafters. The marquess's status at court was clearly extraordinary.

In the front hall, the marquess of Nan'an and Lady Liang sat in the seats of honor. The marquess was nearly forty and looked rather taciturn, with a resolute face. Lady Liang still had feminine charm, with kind eyes and gentle features; she looked

like a noblewoman who would be easy to get along with.

Taking the tea the auntie handed him, Lin Qingyu imagined poisoning it. What kind of toxin would force the marquess and marchioness to taste the loss of freedom?

They drank his tea. Smiling, Lady Liang asked, “Did you sleep well last night, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu came back to his senses. “Well enough,” he said.

“From now on, the manor is your home. If something is unfamiliar, you can tell Mother.”

“Thank you, Lady.”

The auntie seemed annoyed. “Why are you still calling her ‘Lady’? You need to call her ‘Mother,’ like the young marquess does.”

This auntie is quite persistent about demanding I change the way I address others. Why don’t I just call her “Auntie Nitpicky”? If she’s so anxious that the lady be called “mother,” why doesn’t she do it herself?

Lin Qingyu looked down. “It’s difficult to change a habit. Please forgive me, Marquess and Marchioness.”

The marquess of Nan’an looked displeased.

“It’s all right; there’s plenty of time,” Lady Liang replied kindly. “For the first few months after I married into the marquess’s family, I forgot to change the way I addressed others as well.”

“But you should get used to it quickly, so you don’t make fools of us all,” the marquess added.

Thinking of his own parents, Lin Qingyu said stoically, “Yes, Marquess.”

Lady Liang took another sip of tea. “Your bazi is a perfect match for Wancheng’s. That’s why the marquess and I asked the empress to allow this marriage. In the future, Qingyu, you should put your husband first. Serve Wancheng on his sickbed and share some of your good luck with him.”

Lin Qingyu nodded woodenly.

“Speaking of which, you’re the son of the head imperial physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians, and the student of a famed master,” the marquess said. “You should be quite skilled medically.”

Lin Qingyu’s chest tightened. Yes, he was skilled medically. He should’ve been curing the sick and healing the wounded, but now he’d been trapped in the back of a manor as a law-abiding male wife. And the man responsible for trapping him here was continuing to speak. “Physician Zhang is taking care of Wancheng’s health, but you can look after him as well. Don’t waste your medical skills.”

The marquess of Nan’an also served as the minister of revenue, so he had much to attend to. After a few more words, he left.

Lady Liang gave Lin Qingyu a jade bracelet. “This was part of the dowry I brought from my own home. I wanted to give it to Wancheng’s son in the future, but now…” She paused and smiled. “Forget it. You can keep it.”

Lin Qingyu understood exactly what she meant. She had exerted an enormous amount of effort to give Lu Wancheng a male wife, yet she still remembered to resent his inability to bear her son’s children. As Lin Qingyu had expected, each member of

the marquess of Nan'an's family was more vexing than the other. Only Lu Wancheng was somewhat bearable.

Returning to Lanfeng Pavilion, where Lu Wancheng lived, Lin Qingyu casually tossed the brocade box containing the jade bracelet to Fengqin.

"Young Lord, the young marquess still hasn't woken up," she told him. "Is he really all right, sleeping for so long…?"

Lin Qingyu paused on the way to the study. "I'll take a look."

Rather than wanting to check on Lu Wancheng himself, Lin Qingyu wished to feel the sick man's pulse, which supposedly was seldom discernable. Lin Qingyu knew a few things about Physician Zhang, who had taken Lu Wancheng's pulse the previous night; he was indeed famed as a doctor with true talent and knowledge. It would be a pity if Lin Qingyu didn't get a chance to feel the newly powerful pulse that even Physician Zhang had marveled over.

Lin Qingyu entered the inner room where Lu Wancheng still slept in the same position as earlier. He stood next to the bed and looked down at him. In truth, Lu Wancheng didn't look much like his parents. His features were much more delicate than the marquess's and marchioness's.

Lin Qingyu rolled up his sleeve, extending his index and middle fingers. Before he could feel Lu Wancheng's pulse, though, someone grabbed his hand. "What are you doing so sneakily, Lin Qingyu?" asked a casual voice.

Lin Qingyu's hand froze. "Let go." He was afraid that if he used even a small amount of force to break free, Lu Wancheng—whose body was in such a fragile condition—would faint.

Lu Wancheng let go. His eyes were still closed, but the corners of his mouth lifted upward. "Don't be so nervous. I don't like men, so you needn't be so on guard."

Lin Qingyu's eyes widened. "You don't like men?"

"No. I know that homosexuality is popular in the Great Yu Empire, but not everyone is a cut-sleeve."[3] Lu Wancheng opened his eyes. "What about you? Do you like men?"

Lin Qingyu's words got stuck in his throat. It had been a month since he was ordered into this marriage, yet nobody had ever asked him that question. He would be forced to marry this man regardless, so what did his sexuality matter? "I…don't, of course."

Lu Wancheng covered his mouth and coughed a couple of times. "Then you must feel incredibly wronged entering into a warding-off marriage," he said sympathetically.

Lin Qingyu's expression turned dark. "Of course. Wouldn't you feel wronged too, if you were me?"

"That's why I said I would compensate you."

"Easier said than done. What will you compensate me with?"

"My inheritance."

Lin Qingyu snorted. "Yet *I* have to fight for that."

“What other compensation do you want?” asked Lu Wancheng. “As long as it’s not too troublesome, I’ll give it to you.”

Lin Qingyu wanted to take the exam for the Imperial Academy of Medicine. He wanted to leave the marquess of Nan’an’s residence. He wanted to do as he pleased. However, he knew those things were almost impossible. The emperor had allowed for their marriage, so even if Lu Wancheng agreed to a divorce, the emperor would also have to approve.

Lin Qingyu went quiet for a second, then said, “Give me your hand.”

Lu Wancheng covered his wrist with his other hand. “Hm? What’re you going to do?”

“Feel your pulse,” Lin Qingyu replied impatiently.

“You should have just said that.” Lu Wancheng lifted his hand, partly revealing his wrist. “Go ahead, Physician Lin.”

A basin of charcoal was burning in the room, and Lu Wancheng was wrapped in the quilt; still, his wrist felt cold. Lin Qingyu frowned as he took his pulse.

Lu Wancheng’s general health had improved, but the root of his illness hadn’t been cured. Lin Qingyu did feel the sudden breath of life that Physician Zhang had mentioned, but Lu Wancheng’s body was like a bottomless pit slowly engulfing that breath. Unless the root cause of his disease was eradicated, Lu Wancheng still wouldn’t live more than half a year.

And the root cause was incurable.

“Is there hope for me?” Lu Wancheng inquired, noticing Lin Qingyu’s dark expression.

“Why would you think that?” asked Lin Qingyu.

“Because you look unhappy,” Lu Wancheng said, appearing unconcerned. “If I were you, I’d hope for my husband’s death to come faster.”

Lin Qingyu couldn’t help asking, “Do you not care for life and death at all?”

“There’s nothing to care about,” Lu Wancheng replied, smiling. “The heavens determine my fate, not me. Don’t worry, my widow. It will happen soon.”

Lin Qingyu couldn’t find the words to respond.

Chapter 3

LIN QINGYU STOOD UP and left. What did he have to worry about, since the patient had already lost the will to live? The earlier Lu Wancheng died, the faster Lin Qingyu could return to the Lin residence.

He entered the study. When he first arrived at the marquess of Nan'an's residence, he'd brought only two chests with him. One contained clothes, and the other held medical books. The rules of the residence had stated that Lin Qingyu could bring two maids with him, but he wasn't used to having female personal servants; in the Lin residence, his servant was a boy with whom he had grown up and studied.

It was not a glorious fate to marry a man and become a male wife. He didn't want his personal servant to enter the marquess's residence as part of a "dowry," so Lin Qingyu had come alone. Those medical books were the only things that accompanied him.

Among them were many ancient books he hadn't read yet; he wondered whether they contained any cases similar to Lu Wancheng's. As he buried his head in those books, he finally calmed a little.

In school, Lin Qingyu's classmates had found medical books boring and complicated; they'd gotten sleepy after reading just a few pages. But to Lin Qingyu, the fictional books his classmates obsessed over were far less interesting than medical books. Like his father, he had an eidetic memory, so he could recite anything by heart after reading it just once—unlike his classmates, who would need an entire day to memorize the same text.

His father had thought about having him take the imperial civil examinations, but Lin Qingyu just wanted to become a medical official. He loved to see patients gradually improve under his care, and he wanted to enter the Department of Imperial Physicians, where famed doctors from all over the empire gathered. He wanted to study medicine alongside them, find treatments for complicated diseases, and help the people of the Great Yu Empire.

He could have done it. He'd been so close.

"Young Lord?"

The voice didn't sound like a maid's. Lin Qingyu looked up—it was Auntie Nitpicky, whose surname was apparently Liu.

"What?" Lin Qingyu coldly replied.

Auntie Liu smiled. "Young Lord, it's time to eat."

Lin Qingyu didn't have an appetite at all, but it wasn't worth harming his body to spite the bastards in the marquess's household. "Bring my food here. I'll eat in the study."

Auntie Liu waved her hands, objecting. "That won't do, Young Lord."

"Why not?" Lin Qingyu frowned. "Does the residence have a rule against my eating in the study?"

"No, but since this marriage saved the young master, and you're his lucky charm, the lady ordered that you two stay together as much as possible so the young

master can heal faster."

Refuting such superstition would only make him look stupid. But if a warding-off marriage really cured disease, then why did the Great Yu Empire need physicians? Why did the court spend so much money on medical officials? *If you're sick, just get married, and everything will be fine!*

Lin Qingyu examined Auntie Liu. "How old are you?"

Auntie Liu didn't know why he was asking, but she smiled and replied, "I'm fifty-two this year."

"Yet you only look about forty-two. On the other hand, I may not even live to see fifty-two. I imagine that if *you* take care of the young master, Auntie, he'll get better even faster—how fortunate."

Auntie Liu's smile froze. "You must be joking, Young Lord."

Lin Qingyu's expression turned cold. "Do I look like I'm joking? Leave."

Auntie Liu looked extremely unhappy. She was Lady Liang's confidant, and everyone in the manor treated her with the utmost respect, other than its masters. In truth, even they paid homage to her. Who was Lin Qingyu? To put it nicely, he was the young lord of the residence. To put it bluntly, however, he was simply a male wife whom the marquess's household had "bought" to prolong the young master's life. He'd only been here a single day, yet he had the gall to disrespect her?

When he noticed that she wasn't leaving, Lin Qingyu scoffed. "Is there no distinction between ranks in this residence? A mere servant daring to ignore the young lord's orders—is that another household custom?"

Auntie Liu lowered her gaze. "This servant dares not do so. But the lady personally ordered that ginseng chicken soup be made, and that I serve it. If the young lord didn't sample it with the young master, that would betray the lady's kindness."

Ginseng chicken soup? Moron. Didn't she know that the weak shouldn't be nourished with such dishes?[4] *Does Lady Liang think that her son's illness isn't severe enough?*

"She ordered it made. It's not like she made it herself." Lin Qingyu looked away from Auntie Liu and flipped a page in his book. "Just take it to the young master."

Auntie Liu gritted her teeth, glanced ominously at Lin Qingyu, and left with the chicken soup.

Peace returned to the study, but Lin Qingyu was a bit distracted now. Lu Wancheng's stomach and intestines were already damaged; ingesting a nourishing medicinal ingredient like ginseng would only worsen his already-weak state. Lu Wancheng had been ill since he was a child—such a chronic illness would turn even a patient into a physician of sorts. Did Lady Liang not know even that, as his mother? Once or twice was fine, but if Lu Wancheng continually ingested such nourishing treatments, his body would become weaker and weaker.

Forget it. Lin Qingyu would just consider this a good deed done to accumulate positive karma. Lu Wancheng's situation was rare, and Lin Qingyu wanted to observe it for a while longer.

Lin Qingyu left the study and went to the dining hall, but he didn't see Lu Wancheng. "Where's the young master?" he asked a passing maid.

“The young master said he didn’t want to get up. He wanted to eat in bed,” she replied.

Bedridden patients should indeed lie down when possible.

Lin Qingyu headed to the bedroom. Even before he entered, he began telling Lu Wancheng, “That ginseng chicken soup your mother made—don’t…”

Lu Wancheng was sitting on the bed, eating porridge and some side dishes. “Hmm?”

A square table stood in front of Lu Wancheng’s bed. Most of the dishes on that table had mild flavors, save for the large pot of chicken soup with ginseng slices floating in it. The clean ladle beside that pot made it clear that Lu Wancheng hadn’t eaten a single spoonful of the soup.

Lu Wancheng slowly finished chewing and swallowed, then said, “Physician Lin. What a rare guest. Have you eaten?”

“Your mother ordered the kitchen to make that ginseng chicken soup. Why haven’t you had any?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Lu Wancheng wiped his mouth with a handkerchief and casually replied, “I won’t eat anything she sends over.”

That statement piqued Lin Qingyu’s curiosity. “Why not?”

“They said that I have half a year left. Not a single hour—or *minute*—less. If they want to get rid of me earlier, I’ll be sure to give them grief.”

Lin Qingyu found this strange. “Why would they want to get rid of you earlier?”

Lu Wancheng blinked at him. “Take a guess.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t indulge him. “Was that an attempt to be witty…?”

Lu Wancheng suddenly laughed out loud, but he chuckled too hard and choked, coughing until his handsome face reddened slightly.

Lin Qingyu didn’t know why Lu Wancheng was laughing, but he could tell that the relationship between the marchioness and her son wasn’t as loving as it seemed.

Watching a maid pat Lu Wancheng’s back to help with his coughing, Lin Qingyu retracted the hand that he’d extended. “What is there to laugh at?”

Lu Wancheng stopped coughing, mirth in his breath. “I’m only a tiny bit witty, but I’m very lively.”

“That body of yours can’t express any degree of liveliness—even if you want it to,” Lin Qingyu scoffed.

“You’re right. This body makes me want to puke. If it were my own…” Lu Wancheng sighed.

“What do you mean?”

Lu Wancheng smiled and avoided the question, asking, “Since you’re here, will you sit down and eat, Physician Lin? I can’t partake in this chicken soup, but you can.”

“Where am I supposed to sit?”

Lu Wancheng looked around. “Why don’t you sit on the bed with me?”

“Forget it.” Lin Qingyu said ungratefully. “You can eat on your own. Goodbye.”

Lu Wancheng stopped him. “Wait. I have something to give you. I just looked at the list of wedding gifts, and I noticed one that would suit you quite well.”

Not even having looked at the item, Lin Qingyu replied, “I don’t want it.”

Lu Wancheng clicked his tongue. “At least take a peek and see whether you want it. Hualu?”

Hualu was the other maid who served Lu Wancheng, along with Fengqin, and she was cute and energetic. She brought something over and smiled, saying, “If the young master hadn’t told me, I wouldn’t have known what this was.”

Lin Qingyu granted it a glance and was stunned at what he saw.

The item Hualu handed him resembled a cloth bag, but it was made of leather; it could be rolled up easily. Spread flat, it was narrow and clearly wouldn’t hold much.

A layperson wouldn’t have been able to tell, but any practitioner of medicine would know instantly that it was an acupuncture bag. The inner layer was meant to hold needles.

Before he knew it, Lin Qingyu had reached out his hand and stroked the soft leather. His long eyelashes trembled and his gaze turned dark.

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Do you like it?”

Most of the gifts sent to a wedding at the marquess of Nan’an’s residence would be from high-ranking officials in the capital. Lin Qingyu picked up the list on the table and glanced over it—the majority of the presents were gold, silver, jade, antique calligraphy, or paintings. A small acupuncture bag didn’t stand out much among all those. Still, of all the gifts, Lu Wancheng had wanted to give him this.

Lin Qingyu looked at the embroidery on the outside. It read *Union of Lu and Lin, always of one heart* in gold thread. He smiled self-deprecatingly. “Thank you for your good intentions, Young Marquess, but what is the meaning of giving me this?”

Lu Wancheng put his fist to his lips and coughed. “You can use it in the future.”

“Oh? On you?”

Lu Wancheng’s smile faded. He was silent for a moment, then said, “I’m sorry. I don’t mean that. I mean…” His tone turned lighthearted. “If you don’t want it, that’s fine, but don’t get upset. Though you’re very pleasing to the eyes even when you’re upset, Physician Lin, it’s not good for your health. As the saying goes, ‘Why make a fuss when it’s a waste of your breath? You can fuss till you die, but no one will praise your death.’”

“I’m not upset,” Lin Qingyu said calmly.

Lu Wancheng waved Hualu over to them.

“What is it, Young Master?” she asked, bending toward him.

“Someone’s upset,” he replied. “But I’m not telling you who.”

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

Lu Wancheng put his finger to his lips and looked out the window. “Shh. That mother of mine is here.”

“Why shush *me*? You’re the one who talks the most.” Lin Qingyu smiled coldly. “Your mother is probably here to confront me.”

Lu Wancheng stroked his chin. “Let me guess. She wanted you to stay with me as much as possible, but you ignored her?”

In his surprise, Lin Qingyu forgot to be angry. “How did you know?”

Lu Wancheng smiled meaningfully. “I know a lot of things.”

Lin Qingyu mulled that over and smiled abruptly. He rolled up his sleeves and picked up Lu Wancheng’s bowl of half-finished porridge. “I’ll feed you this, Young Marquess.”

“…Oh.”

Outside, Auntie Liu helped Lady Liang into the courtyard. Fengqin approached her, saying, “Greetings, Lady.”

“Where’s the young master?”

“Eating in the bedroom, Lady.”

“Is the young lord with him?”

Fengqin shook her head. “The young lord is alone in the study.”

“Now you’ve been told that too, Lady,” Auntie Liu whispered. “The young lord himself said everything I told you.”

Lady Liang held her hand to the hairpin near her temple. “I trust you, of course. Let’s take a look inside.”

Auntie Liu walked quickly, clearing the way for Lady Liang. “The young master only just woke up last night; he’s in need of someone to serve him. There are maids in his room, but the young lord is his wife; if his husband is sick in bed, how could a wife not tend to him? It’s only the first day of the marriage, but the young lord’s behavior is so insulting already. How could he betray the solemn duty of marriage…?”

The marchioness of Nan’an was known for her gentle temper, but now she frowned and quickened her steps. They rushed into the room as if a fire were burning behind them.

The wedding decorations hadn’t yet been removed, and Lu Wancheng was half sitting, half lying on the wedding bed. Lin Qingyu sat beside him, holding the porridge bowl in one hand and feeding Lu Wancheng with the other. “Here, Young Marquess,” he said.

“It’s a bit hot. Blow on it,” Lu Wancheng teased.

Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes as if wanting his gaze to poke a hole in Lu Wancheng’s smiling face. But the couple—one of them handsome and sumptuously dressed, the other beautiful and dignified—looked happy and peaceful.

Lady Liang and Auntie Liu were frozen until Lu Wancheng looked over. “Mother, why are you here?” he asked.

Lady Liang furrowed her brow, then relaxed it. “To see how your appetite is,” she said gently, glancing at Auntie Liu.

Furious, Auntie Liu whispered, “Didn’t you say the young lord was in the study?!”

“J-just now, he was,” replied Fengqin, confused.

Lin Qingyu set down the porridge and stood. “But Lady, you already asked Auntie Liu to come here, so why are you now here in person? Simply to confirm that the young marquess was eating well?”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “You came to watch me eat, despite the chill outside? I’m moved, Mother.”

Lady Liang forced a smile. “What mother wouldn’t want to spoil her child? Did you eat the chicken soup I sent, Wancheng?”

Lu Wancheng looked at Lin Qingyu. “I wanted to, but he wouldn’t let me.”

“The books say that one must cleanse the patient’s body of toxins before nourishment,” Lin Qingyu explained calmly. “The young marquess is weak right now, and strong nourishment would only burden his body further. That’s common knowledge, Lady. You knew that, didn’t you?”

Lady Liang’s face darkened. She opened her mouth, stammering, “I-I…”

“Of course Mother knows. But the servants must’ve forgotten to remind her,” Lu Wancheng said, smiling. “Isn’t that right, Auntie Liu?”

Auntie Liu glanced sidelong at Lady Liang. When the lady didn’t return her gaze, Auntie Liu tacitly understood something and grudgingly knelt. “Yes, yes, it was my fault. I should be punished.”

Before Lady Liang could respond, Lu Wancheng asked, “Qingyu, how do you want to punish her?”

“This concerns the young marquess’s body, so to prevent further incidents, we’ve got to give her a slap on the wrist as an example to others,” Lin Qingyu mused, then told Auntie Liu, “According to the manor’s rules, you should be fined three months’ salary and sentenced to a month of hard labor.”

“I think that’s fair.” Lu Wancheng nodded. “However, it’s not my decision. It’s Mother’s.”

Lady Liang forced a smile. “Do as Qingyu said.”

After that, she clearly became distracted; she sat around for a bit, then left with Auntie Liu.

Once they were the only two people left in the room, Lu Wancheng asked Lin Qingyu, “How did Auntie Liu offend you?”

“She forced me to change the way I addressed someone—twice.”

“How so? Did she make you call me husband?”

Lin Qingyu’s expression was as cold as jade. “…Yes.”

“You certainly know how to hold a grudge, Physician Lin.” Lu Wancheng smiled.

Lin Qingyu glared at him, his look sharp as a knife. “Is that funny?”

Lu Wancheng held back a chuckle. “I won’t laugh. But how did you know the manor’s rules?”

“Auntie Liu insisted on telling me,” Lin Qingyu said simply. “I tried to ignore her, but my memory is impeccable, so I had no choice but to learn them.”

Lu Wancheng smiled and said to himself, “Damn. What a flex.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t understand. “Flex? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that you’re quite good.”

Chapter 4

TOO MANY THINGS had happened that day, and Lin Qingyu realized right before he went to bed that he'd forgotten something—to ask someone to put a bed for him in the study. He thought about sleeping at the desk in the study that night, but unexpectedly, Lu Wancheng sent Hualu to ask that he come back and sleep in their room.

Lin Qingyu entered the bedroom with an unhappy expression.

Lu Wancheng had taken his medicine and was about to go to bed. When he saw Lin Qingyu, he smiled. "You're here."

Lin Qingyu cut to the chase. "What's the meaning of this?"

Lu Wancheng didn't understand. "The meaning of what?"

"Didn't you say that we needn't take this marriage seriously?"

"I did."

"Then why make me come back to sleep here?"

Lu Wancheng smiled, saying, "You've misunderstood. I didn't ask you to come back to sleep with you."

His direct wording made Lin Qingyu pause. "You're the young master of a noble household," he told Lu Wancheng, tone stiff. "Could you speak more decorously?"

In a decorous tone, Lu Wancheng responded, "I didn't ask you to come back to sleep with you. After all, no matter how beautiful you are, I'm no cut-sleeve."

Lin Qingyu took a deep breath, deciding not to drag the topic out any further. "Get to the point."

"I want your good fortune to rub off on me," Lu Wancheng said contemplatively. "When you're here, my body feels less strained."

Lin Qingyu paused. "Are you serious?"

Lu Wancheng nodded. "Entirely serious."

The corner of Lin Qingyu's mouth twitched. "Fool," he said mockingly. "I didn't think you'd believe such things as well." He'd thought that Lu Wancheng was different from the others in the marquess of Nan'an's manor, but he was wrong.

"In the past, I was even more skeptical than you, but I do believe in them a little now," Lu Wancheng said slowly. "Physician Lin, do you believe in the three souls and seven spirits? And reincarnation?"

"No," Lin Qingyu bluntly said.

"Why not?"

"Because I've never witnessed those."

"But I have."

"You must've been mistaken."

"Ah," Lu Wancheng murmured. "I knew nobody would believe me."

Lin Qingyu frowned. “So you accept the imperial preceptor’s nonsense?”

If not for the bazi the imperial preceptor had sent, there wouldn’t have been a warding-off marriage. Obviously, the man was listed among those he held grudges against.

“The imperial preceptor…” Lu Wancheng repeated, deep in thought. “That reminds me. I need to visit Great Yu’s imperial preceptor, who knows everything about heaven, earth, and the gods.”

“First, you’ll need to learn how to get out of bed,” Lin Qingyu said brusquely.

The imperial preceptor never took part in politics, but he was respected; he was akin to a relative of the imperial family. The emperor often summoned the imperial preceptor to join him in the palace. If Lu Wancheng wanted to see the imperial preceptor, he would have to ask for an audience.

Lu Wancheng snapped back to his senses. “Let’s not talk about this now,” he said. “Physician Lin, please take a look at the soft divan Hualu prepared for you.”

“What divan…?”

Only then did Lin Qingyu notice that the divan he’d slept on the previous night was now covered with thick bedding and quilts—even a soft pillow—making it look like a small bed. The expression left Lin Qingyu’s face. He didn’t know whether he should praise Lu Wancheng or scold him.

Lu Wancheng told him graciously, “I don’t mind sleeping in the same bed as a man, but I was afraid you would. We can take turns using the divan.”

When Lin Qingyu left home for school, he had traveled far and wide with his teacher and occasionally slept in the same bed as fellow students. It was nothing for two heterosexual men to sleep in the same bed, but Lu Wancheng… Well, he was Lin Qingyu’s husband, so Lin Qingyu couldn’t treat him like a normal man.

A divan was at least more comfortable to sleep on than a desk, and this way, Lin Qingyu could avoid Lady Liang’s fuss if she found out that he and Lu Wancheng slept in separate rooms.

Lin Qingyu made up his mind. “We don’t need to take turns. I can use it.”

As the night went on, the lights in the manor slowly went out. The newlyweds —one on the bed, and the other on the divan—were separated by a screen embroidered with mandarin ducks playing in water.

Lu Wancheng had slept too much during the day, so he wasn’t quite sleepy yet. Putting his hands behind his head, he began chatting with Lin Qingyu. “Physician Lin, how old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Lin Qingyu said listlessly, his eyes closed.

“So, by normal standards, you’re probably a couple of months older than me. Why don’t I call you ‘Yu-ge’ going forward?”

“Do you have a headache…?”

Lu Wancheng paused. “No.”

“I assumed you felt so ill that you forgot your own age.”

“Oh. How old am I?”

Is he actually this stupid or merely pretending to be? Agitation before bed wasn't good for you, so Lin Qingyu tried to remain calm as he said, "Nineteen."

"Really? What great news," Lu Wancheng laughed. "You should call me Wancheng-gege, then."

Lin Qingyu turned over, showing Lu Wancheng only the back of his head. "Go to sleep, Young Marquess. Anything can happen in your dreams."

Lu Wancheng chuckled, saying to himself, "A beauty with a terrible temper—but somehow, such an interesting character isn't the protagonist…"

The night got later. Physically and mentally exhausted, Lin Qingyu let himself sink into his own dreams.

The Great Yu Empire placed great weight on medical expertise. Beyond the Department of Imperial Physicians and the Imperial Pharmacy, an Imperial Academy of Medicine had been established outside the palace to select and train talented medical students. The Imperial Academy of Medicine conducted an entrance examination every three years, a schedule similar to that of the imperial civil examinations. As long as a potential student could pass the entrance exam, he could enter the Imperial Academy of Medicine, regardless of his teachers or family background. After that, one could read all the rare and valuable books in the world, appreciate the finest materials and ingredients, and work with famed physicians inside and outside the court—even be appointed a palace official, author books, or travel to other nations to study.

The Imperial Academy of Medicine was a sanctuary for physicians, and many squeezed every last bit of knowledge from their brains to get in. However, the selection process and exam were extremely demanding. It was no exaggeration to say that only one in ten thousand applicants was accepted. Lin Qingyu, talented and skilled, had been told by his mentor that he would pass the examination. Still, he hadn't dared to slack off; he'd studied painstakingly for three years.

When the examination day finally arrived, he and several classmates were waiting outside the exam room. As they chatted, he brimmed with vitality and confidence. In him, there was no trace of the other students' nervousness and anxiety.

As the exam room's vermilion door slowly opened, Lin Qingyu's eyes sparkled. He went slowly up the steps toward his sanctuary. Just when he was about to touch the ray of light coming from the door, an unfamiliar voice had stopped him.

The speaker was a man wearing eunuch's clothing. Lin Qingyu couldn't see his face, but he saw the yellow imperial edict in the man's hand.

"An imperial edict has arrived addressed to Lin Qingyu—"

Lin Qingyu knelt to listen to the edict. The other students seemed not to notice the sudden development; one by one, they filed into the exam room, disappearing past him.

"In compliance with the will of the universe, the emperor proclaims that Lu Wancheng, son of the marquess of Nan'an and a man of noble character and extraordinary appearance, will soon turn twenty. I now address the son of Lin Rushan, the head imperial physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians, a filial man with a dignified appearance. The emperor has granted the two young men a marriage, and an auspicious day must be chosen for the wedding."

Lin Qingyu looked up in shock, and the bright yellow light nearly blinded him. Then the door to the Imperial Academy of Medicine slammed shut.

Lin Qingyu jolted awake from his dream. Only his panting could be heard in the silence. His heart gradually slowed, but his depression and reluctance were as thick as ink, ineradicable.

His dream had been different from the reality. In actuality, the eunuch who'd delivered the imperial edict had gone directly to the Lin residence, after which Lin Qingyu was disqualified from the examination. He became the male wife of the marquess of Nan'an's son before the examination even took place.

It was two hours before dawn, but Lin Qingyu no longer felt sleepy. As he rose from the divan, intending to pour himself a cup of tea, he heard a stifled moan—it was Lu Wancheng.

Lin Qingyu lit a lamp and walked briskly to the bed. "Young Marquess?"

Lu Wancheng lay curled up on the bed, his eyes closed. His expression was slightly distorted, his long hair sticking to his sweaty face.

"Lu Wancheng?" Lin Qingyu called again.

Lu Wancheng opened his eyes, his vision bleary. "Physician Lin?"

"Yes."

"Physician Lin…I don't feel very well."

Lin Qingyu felt Lu Wancheng's pulse, confirming that he had palpitations.

When Lin Qingyu tended to a patient, his tone warmed a bit. "I know. Your chest feels uncomfortable, right?"

Lu Wancheng nodded.

"Bear with it for a moment. I'll be back soon."

"Are you going to get a knife?" Lu Wancheng asked weakly.

Lin Qingyu was confused. "Why would I get a knife?"

"To finish me off?"

"…Right now, I have no interest in killing you." He had, however, entertained thoughts of poisoning Lu Wancheng before the wedding, so that he wouldn't have to engage in intercourse. If Lu Wancheng hadn't behaved so well on the wedding night and preemptively suggested that they take the marriage lightly, he might've been half a eunuch by now.

Lin Qingyu took a wooden medicine chest from the chest that held his clothes. The box contained many of his masterpieces. Most were poisons, but of course, there were also medicines that could cure diseases and save lives.

Lin Qingyu returned to the bedside with a porcelain bottle of pills and an acupuncture bag. "This is a calming pill that can relieve your palpitations. Want it?"

Lu Wancheng said, "I'll give it a try."

Lin Qingyu helped Lu Wancheng sit up, then fed him the pill. "I'll use needles on you too, just to be safe."

Seemingly recalling some trauma from his youth, Lu Wancheng tried to get up on his arms. "Needles?!"

“Acupuncture!”

“Oh,” Lu Wancheng said, lying back down. “Be gentle, then.”

“No, I’m going to use a lot of force,” Lin Qingyu retorted impatiently.

Lu Wancheng had nothing to say to that.

Lin Qingyu took a deep breath. Acupuncture was delicate, and he needed to concentrate.

“Am I going to die again, Physician Lin? If you can save me, then save me—but, if you can’t, don’t force yourself.” Lu Wancheng sighed. “I only had a few days of sleeping in…”

“Shut up.” A thin sheen of sweat covered Lin Qingyu’s forehead. His eyes shone as he focused on inserting the first needle. “I won’t let you die—not tonight.”

The medicine and acupuncture alleviated Lu Wancheng’s symptoms, and he quickly fell asleep. Lin Qingyu sighed in relief and looked out the window; the sky was lightening.

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Well into the next day, Lu Wancheng still hadn’t woken. Hualu was so worried that she kept checking his breath.

“If you have nothing to do, go sweep the yard,” Lin Qingyu told her.

“Young Lord, the young master has been asleep for twelve hours,” Hualu responded. “Is that normal?”

Relaxed, Lin Qingyu said, “Patients indeed sleep more.” But before Hualu could heave a sigh of relief, he continued, “He really has been sleeping too much, though. Did he get too little sleep in the past?”

Hualu shook her head. “The young master’s weak body has kept him bedridden for years. He sleeps when he’s tired.”

Lin Qingyu sank into thought.

Lu Wancheng didn’t wake up until after noon. Then he called Lin Qingyu over to thank him. “Thank heavens you were there last night, Physician Lin. Otherwise, I wouldn’t even have known how I died.”

Seeing Lu Wancheng’s apparently healthy complexion, Lin Qingyu couldn’t be bothered with bedside manner. “It would’ve been from illness, of course.”

“I have no way to repay your great kindness, but I’ve decided to do something troublesome for you.”

“Just stop talking before bed and give me some peace,” Lin Qingyu said indifferently.

“Ah.” Sighing, Lu Wancheng smiled. “You’re scolding me for being chatty.”

During this exchange, Fengqin entered to report, “Young Master, Young Lord, the second young lady is here.”

This second young lady was Lu Wancheng’s sister; Lin Qingyu hadn’t met her yet.

Lu Wancheng mulled this over. “The second young lady… Why is she here?” he asked slowly.

“To visit her sick brother, of course,” Lin Qingyu interjected. “I won’t interrupt you two.”

Lu Wancheng grabbed his sleeve. “Look at the rush you’re in. I didn’t say I’d meet with her.”

“You aren’t going to meet with her?” Fengqin asked, surprised. “But you two have always had the closest of relationships. I noticed that she brought kneepads for you—she definitely made them herself. She visited yesterday, but she left when she found out that you were asleep.”

Lin Qingyu disliked the residents of the marquess of Nan’an’s residence, but Lu Wancheng wasn’t in his shoes. How could a brother ignore the younger sister who’d come to visit repeatedly?

“If you don’t meet her now, she’ll come again,” Lin Qingyu pointed out. “Why are you hiding from your own sister?”

“I’m not hiding, but I’d rather not have to put on an act,” Lu Wancheng replied, deep in thought. “How about this? Fengqin, tell her to treat me as if I were dead.”

He turned away, showing them his lonely, stubborn back.

Chapter 5

AFTER A FEW DAYS of care, Lu Wancheng seemed to improve, despite whatever was going on inside him. Lin Qingyu suggested he get out of bed and try walking a bit; Lu Wancheng listened to his advice and got up, taking two painstaking steps before his limbs felt weak. He lay back down and said shamelessly, "Nothing in the world is difficult, as long as you're willing to give up. I choose to give up."

"Do you want to lie in bed for the rest of your life?" Lin Qingyu demanded.

"Is something wrong with that?" Lu Wancheng retorted.

"…No. Lie there, then."

Lin Qingyu, who believed in hard work and persistence, couldn't stand Lu Wancheng's defeated attitude. He didn't step into the room again for an entire day—out of sight, out of mind.

Today was the day the bride would return home.

Lin Qingyu was loath to view himself as a newlywed "bride," but he did miss his family. He'd only been away for a couple of days, but it felt like years.

Early that morning, Lady Liang had sent a steward to Lanfeng Pavilion. The steward had ordered servants to bring two chests of gifts from the marchioness for Lin Qingyu to take home.

Hualu was young, and said bluntly, "What—only two chests? The lady would usually send more than this, even if it were a servant girl who'd gotten married."

The steward smiled. "Miss Hualu, you don't understand. The number of gifts a new bride takes back home depends on the dowry she brought over. Since the young lord didn't bring much of a dowry with him, few gifts are being given in return, naturally."

That much was true. When Lin Qingyu's parents had prepared his dowry, he'd pleaded that it be as paltry as possible—preferably, they'd have given nothing at all. He didn't take any of the antiques or porcelain valuables his father had prepared, nor the gold and silver jewelry or farmland deeds his mother readied. Taking the Lin family's belongings into the marquess of Nan'an's residence would only have sullied them.

Lin Qingyu knew his parents weren't materialistic; their only wishes were for his safety. "I don't need to bring these two chests," he said.

The steward was stunned, thinking he'd misheard. "Young Lord, you mean…"

"Leave them for the marquess and marchioness."

Though Hualu was unmarried, she knew returning home with gifts was a matter of respect. She tried to persuade him. "You should take some, Young Lord. A newlywed bride who returned to his parents' home with nothing in hand would definitely be pointed at and gossiped about."

"The Lin family has been gossiped about already," Lin Qingyu said coolly. "Let them continue."

Homosexuality was popular in the Great Yu Empire; the families of high-ranking officials and dignitaries all included a couple of male concubines, and even the emperor had one or two. But a man could not bear children and thus couldn't be someone's main wife.

According to the law in Great Yu, marriage was between one man and one woman, or one man, one woman, and several concubines. If not to follow the imperial preceptor's instructions and save Lu Wancheng's life, the emperor wouldn't have violated ancient law and granted a marriage to two men alone.

Lin Qingyu was the first man to become a wife through imperial permission, which was enough to make the Lin family infamous in the capital; they were a hot topic among the city's dignitaries.

As the steward grumbled to himself, Lin Qingyu asked, "Is the carriage ready?"

The steward cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. There's one more thing—the lady asked me to tell you that the eldest young master hasn't fully recovered yet, so he won't be accompanying you. His body might not be able to bear the cold outside."

"Don't worry," Lin Qingyu said calmly. "I didn't plan on taking him back with me."

Lin Qingyu climbed into the carriage alone. The marquess of Nan'an's residence and the Lin residence were nearly at opposite ends of the city, so a round trip would take most of the day.

As he passed Yongxing Street, Lin Qingyu had the driver stop. "Wait here."

Yongxing Street was the most opulent thoroughfare in the capital. Shops on either side of the road sold silk, cloth, porcelain, wine, tea, and more. Lin Qingyu entered a wine shop and bought two jars of fine wine, then went into the snack shop next door to order a few pounds of candied fruit and refreshments. Bringing those would be enough.

The Lin household knew that Lin Qingyu would come home today, so they'd opened the doors early in the morning. When it was almost time for him to arrive, his mother took her younger son and the servant boy who'd followed Lin Qingyu since childhood and stood at the doors, waiting.

Just before his carriage arrived, Lin Qingyu opened the window. From a distance, he saw a little boy jumping up and down, waving at his carriage.

That was Lin Qinghe, his six-year-old brother. Lin Qingyu's heart, which had been tense for days on end, finally relaxed a little.

As soon as Lin Qingyu stepped out of the carriage, his brother jumped into his arms, yelling, "Gege!" He was at the age when his baby teeth were falling out, so his two front teeth were missing; it distorted his pronunciation somewhat.

"Young Master!" Huantong, Lin Qingyu's personal servant, was as overjoyed as if his young master had returned from the battlefield instead of the marquess's residence.

Lin Qingyu patted his little brother's head and looked toward the gentle woman next to them. "Mother."

Her eyes were tearful. "It's good that you're back." Slightly nervous, she eyed the carriage. "Is the young marquess still in there?"

“The young marquess is bedridden and can’t go out. He said to treat him as if he were dead,” Lin Qingyu said, recounting Lu Wancheng’s words.

His mother was shocked. “That…”

Lin Qingyu gave her a comforting smile. “Let’s not mention other people now that I’m home. Where’s Father?”

“One of his students came to visit today. He’s with them in the hall.”

“Which one?”

“Tan Qizhi.”

Lin Qingyu’s smile faded a bit. “He sure knows how to pick a day to visit.” Did he have to come on the same day Lin Qingyu visited?

The Tan family ran the largest apothecary in the capital, and Lin Qingyu was cordial with Tan Qizhi, his father’s student. Still, Lin Qingyu didn’t want to interact with him too much; Tan Qizhi was always one-sidedly competitive with others, and eventually, it became annoying. Compared to Tan Qizhi, even Lu Wancheng was lovable.

At any rate, Lin Qingyu’s mother was relieved that Lu Wancheng hadn’t come along. She and her husband only missed their son, and they would just have felt awkward if their son-in-law had accompanied him. “Let’s not stand at the doors. Come in. I made your favorite—plum-blossom cake.”

“Did you make it yourself, Mother?”

She smiled. “Of course. You don’t like it when someone else makes it.”

Lin Qingyu gave her a small smile, and his ice-cold aura seemed to warm into a spring breeze. The driver from the marquess’s residence was stunned—was this the same young lord who constantly ignored everyone, his expression aloof?

As soon as Lin Qingyu entered, he saw Tan Qizhi approach him. “Qingyu-xiong, you’re finally here!”

Tan Qizhi was handsome, and he had a scholarly temperament; at first glance, he looked like a talented young man.

Lin Qingyu nodded at him, then greeted the man in the place of honor. “Father.”

His father didn’t show emotion like his mother did, but his eyes sparkled as he said, “You’re back.”

Tan Qizhi looked outside, then asked, “It’s just you? Where’s the young marquess?”

“He didn’t come,” Lin Qingyu said coldly.

Tan Qizhi was surprised. “I’ve never seen a newlywed bride return without their husband.”

“No? Well, now you have,” Lin Qingyu replied.

“Perhaps the young marquess is still unwell and cannot go out,” his father remarked.

But even if so, how could Lu Wancheng not at least have sent a greeting card?

Tan Qizhi looked Lin Qingyu up and down blatantly, not even trying to hide his gaze. Lin Qingyu wore a plain white robe today; he was thin to begin with, so his

waistline looked elegant as he stood up straight. He was beautiful, but too pretentious, Tan Qizhi felt. Would Lin Qingyu's husband like a male wife who always acted superior? He doubted that Beauty Lin was favored by his husband or in-laws.

"Qingyu-xiong is still as attractive as ever. You look even prettier than a woman," Tan Qizhi said, smiling. "But why do you still dress so simply as the young lord of the marquess's residence?"

Lin Qingyu eyed Tan Qizhi with the same frankness. "I can't measure up to Tan-xiong, of course. You're wearing purple robes, and there are rings and pendants on your hands and waist—how noble. No one looks more like the male wife of a noble family than you."

Tan Qizhi's face twisted but quickly returned to normal. "You must be joking, Qingyu-xiong. On that note…where are your return gifts? Bring them out, so that I can experience a marquess's wealth."

Lin Qingyu lifted the two jars of wine. "Here."

His father smiled at him.

Tan Qizhi just stared. "Um…" Favored or not, Lin Qingyu was still the male wife of the marquess's household. How could his return gift be so pathetic?

"I brought a few pounds of candied fruit as well," Lin Qingyu said, his tone light. "Would you like to try some, Tan-xiong?"

Hearing that there was candied fruit, Lin Qinghe said excitedly, "I want to eat those! Thanks, Gege."

"Did you hide all the good gifts because you didn't want to give them to your parents, Qingyu-xiong?" Tan Qizhi asked jokingly.

"Don't say such nonsense," interjected Lin Qingyu's father. "Please warm up the wine, Lady. I'll have a few drinks with Qingyu and Qizhi later."

Troubled, Tan Qizhi said, "Teacher, I'm afraid the rules don't allow that."

"How does it break the rules?"

Tan Qizhi hesitated. "Qingyu-xiong is married now. How could he drink with me, an unrelated man?"

Lin Qingyu's father glowered. Although Lin Qingyu was good-looking and had joined a marquess's family as a male wife, the man still considered him his son. Still, others might not see Lin Qingyu that way. The marquess of Nan'an's household had strict rules, so whether a male wife could interact with men outside it—let alone drink at the same table—was up for debate.

"It indeed breaks the rules. After all, how could we allow an outsider to attend a family meal?" Lin Qingyu seemed composed, but he was already mulling over what type of poison Tan Qizhi deserved to be dosed with. "What are you still here for, Tan-xiong? You can leave."

Tan Qizhi was speechless. He clearly didn't want to leave—he hadn't seen anything interesting yet—so he laughed dryly and said, "To be honest, I came today not only to greet my shifu, but also to request something…"

Before he could finish, a steward dashed over. "Master! Lady! Your son-in-law is here!"

"*Who's* here? Don't mislabel people," Lin Qingyu said icily.

“It’s the young marquess!” insisted Huantong, who had followed the steward. “The young marquess of the marquess of Nan’an’s household!”

Why was Lu Wancheng now at the Lin residence instead of sleeping?

Lin Qingyu kept his emotions in check. “I’ll go take a look.”

“We’ll go as well,” his father said in a low voice.

Lu Wancheng was a man of high status, after all. If they neglected to greet him, someone with ulterior motives could spread rumors. If such rumors reached the marquess of Nan’an’s residence, Lin Qingyu’s situation would become even more dire.

Tan Qizhi rolled his eyes and followed them.

When Lin Qingyu reached the courtyard, he saw Lu Wancheng sitting in a wheelchair, a servant pushing it.

Their eyes met.

Lu Wancheng smiled, looking completely gentlemanly.

“Qingyu, you didn’t bring me when you went home?” Seeing Lin Qingyu’s less-than-touching expression, he whispered, “No way. Why are you mad again? What is there to be mad about in your own home?”

Lu Wancheng’s face had regained some color; still, his complexion was pale. He held an exquisite portable heater in one hand; he was dressed in deep-red robes topped with a winter cape, a pure-white fox fur over his legs. Even with so many layers on, he didn’t look puffed up; instead, he looked elegant and handsome—quite perfect.

Lying in bed, Lu Wancheng looked like a salted fish. But out of bed…he looked much more presentable.

Before Lin Qingyu could say anything, his parents came out. Lu Wancheng glanced sideways, and the servant behind him tacitly understood. He took the heater and fox fur in one hand and helped Lu Wancheng up with the other. Once Lu Wancheng was standing steadily, he bowed to Lin Qingyu’s parents. “Greetings, Father-in-Law, Mother-in-Law. My apologies for the delay.” He was graceful and generous, exactly what was expected of a wealthy family’s young master.

Lin Qinghe hid behind his brother, staring at Lu Wancheng with wide eyes. “Gege, he’s so handsome.”

Lin Qingyu watched Lu Wancheng coldly. “You’re seeing things,” he told Lin Qinghe.

“There’s no need to be so polite, Young Marquess,” Lin Qingyu’s father said. “Since you’re ill, please sit.”

Lu Wancheng sat back down in his wheelchair, his gaze falling onto Tan Qizhi. “And this is…?”

“Greetings, Young Marquess,” Tan Qizhi said respectfully, stepping forward. “My name is Tan Qizhi. I’m Head Imperial Physician Lin’s student. My family owns the Changxihe Apothecary in the capital.”

Lu Wancheng had a slight smile on his face. “Hmm? Chang-what-he?”

“Changxihe,” Tan Qizhi said hurriedly.

“What-xihe?”

Tan Qizhi had a vague sense that he was being played with, but the other man’s status was so superior to his that he could only keep smiling. “It’s Changxihe.”

“Changxi-what?”

What’s going on…? Lin Qingyu interrupted them. “The wind is cold. Father, Mother, please go back inside. I’ll take care of the young marquess.”

His mother reached her hand out to Lin Qinghe. “Don’t stick so close to your brother, Qinghe. Come here.”

After his family left the courtyard, Lin Qingyu whispered to Lu Wancheng, “What’s wrong with you today?”

Alone with Lin Qingyu, Lu Wancheng couldn’t be bothered to pretend anymore. He looked downward, appearing exhausted. “I came to support you.”

“No need.” This was out of the ordinary, and Lin Qingyu felt something must be afoot. He furrowed his brows. “You’re normally not awake at this time.”

“No, I’m not. It took multiple tries to get up,” Lu Wancheng said, smiling. “And I did all this to repay you for the medicine and acupuncture. What do you think —aren’t you touched?”

“Not really,” Lin Qingyu coldly replied.

Lu Wancheng raised his eyebrows. “Then would you like me to go?”

Lin Qingyu gave it some thought. “Sure. You can find an excuse to go back to the manor.”

Lu Wancheng choked, suddenly feeling that life was not worth living. “… That’s a bit much, pal.”

Chapter 6

LU WANCHENG LOOKED CHAGRINED, as if he had climbed a mountain of swords and sunk into a sea of fire—in other words, gone through immense hardship and danger—to reach the Lin residence.

Seeing him like that, Lin Qingyu wanted to laugh. Lu Wancheng had merely woken up two hours earlier than normal, gotten into a carriage outside the house, and sat in a wheelchair. What right did he have to feel chagrined?

Having Tan Qizhi around had been bad enough, but just when Lin Qingyu was about to chase him away, Lu Wancheng had come to join the fun as well. Why was it becoming so difficult for Lin Qingyu just to have a nice meal with his family?

Noticing how unmoved Lin Qingyu was, Lu Wancheng had to let his intentions go. He had arrived with gifts, which was enough to show Lin Qingyu respect; since his medicinal debt was now almost repaid, going home and sleeping some more sounded like a pretty solid plan. It truly was chilly outside, and it was tiring to act like a nobleman.

He shrugged. "All right. I'll just say that something suddenly came up."

Before Lin Qingyu could respond, a little head peeked out from a room. "Gege, why haven't you guys come in yet?"

Lin Qinghe cast a curious gaze at Lu Wancheng, and Lu Wancheng smiled back at him.

Lin Qingyu said he'd be right there, then addressed Lu Wancheng. "And you…"

"To follow etiquette, shouldn't I go in and say goodbye to your parents?" Lu Wancheng asked.

"You suddenly seem to know quite a lot about etiquette. Why ask me?"

Lu Wancheng smiled. "If you say that, Physician Lin, I take it my acting earlier was quite good."

Lin Qingyu pushed him inside. There, the Lin family had left a seat open for Lu Wancheng at the table.

A charcoal basin was burning in the hall, making it warmer than outside, but not stuffy. The scent of warm wine wafted through the chamber, and two miniature winter-bamboo plants had been placed in the corner, giving the space an elegance and freshness.

Most of the dishes on the table were light in flavor, as the Lin family preferred; they included a white pastry with a hint of red, like the mingling of red and white plum blossoms in full bloom. Lu Wancheng couldn't help glancing at it a couple of times.

"This way, Young Marquess," Lin Qingyu's father said.

Lu Wancheng paused and smiled. "I won't be eating. I came in to say goodbye to my in-laws."

“Oh?” Tan Qizhi glanced at Lin Qingyu meaningfully. “You only just arrived. Why leave without even having a meal?”

Lu Wancheng coughed twice. “I’m afraid my body can’t bear this for much longer. I need to go back and rest… How embarrassing.”

“It takes at least two hours to get to the marquess’s manor, and it’s a bumpy ride,” Lin Qingyu’s mother pointed out. “Why don’t you rest here first, then leave when you feel better, Young Marquess?”

Lu Wancheng looked conflicted. He turned to Lin Qingyu. “Well…Qingyu, what do you think?”

A teasing glint shone in Lin Qingyu’s eyes.

Lu Wancheng hadn’t said that something had come up; instead, he’d said that he wasn’t feeling well and had to rest. Anyone with a brain could’ve figured out the response he was aiming for. This was the Lin residence, and Lin Qingyu’s father was the head imperial physician of the Department of Imperial Physicians. Though not high in rank, he was close to the emperor, caring for him, the empress, and the palace concubines. His medicinal skills, therefore, were obviously extraordinary; it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say he was the best physician in the Great Yu Empire. By saying in front of that man that he was unwell, Lu Wancheng had clearly indicated what he wanted.

Lin Qingyu noticed that, but didn’t expose him. “Up to you.”

“Then I’ll listen to you,” Lu Wancheng told Lin Qingyu’s mother.

Before they sat down, Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng to one side to wash his hands. “Let my father take your pulse after the meal,” he instructed.

“There’s really not any need,” Lu Wancheng casually replied. “It’s a terminal illness, so it’s incurable.”

“Stop pretending. Didn’t you stay so my father could see you?”

Lu Wancheng washed his hands carefully and responded honestly, “No. I just wanted to try the plum-blossom cake. It looks delicious, and I’m a bit hungry.”

Lin Qingyu would have never believed such nonsense from anyone else. But when Lu Wancheng said it, Lin Qingyu thought it might actually be true. To lazy people, eating was even more important than sleeping.

Lin Qingyu turned and saw that Tan Qizhi was still there. Not bothering to beat around the bush anymore, he bluntly asked, “You can’t drink with me, so why are you still here?”

Tan Qizhi seemed prepared for that question. Smiling, he said, “I am fortunate today to witness the young marquess’s grace. I believe that he is benevolent and open-minded, so he wouldn’t stop you from drinking with me like some overly traditional minds would, Qingyu-xiong. I just want to raise a few glasses to my teacher. You don’t mind, do you, Young Marquess?”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Of course not. We’re all men, so there’s no need to be that restrictive.”

Lin Qingyu shot Lu Wancheng a cold glance, regretting that he hadn’t stabbed him a few more times while performing acupuncture. Lu Wancheng sure knew how to make things troublesome for him.

Before Tan Qizhi could sit, Lu Wancheng abruptly asked, “Tan-xiong, are you married?”

“I have been married for three years, Young Marquess,” Tan Qizhi said.

Lu Wancheng sighed. “Your wife wouldn’t be upset if she knew that you were having wine with us, would she?”

Everyone looked at each other. Confused, Tan Qizhi asked, “Why would she be upset?”

“You’d be drinking with a male wife and the man who married him. It seems taboo.”

Lin Qingyu glanced at him, sensing something mischievous in the man’s gaze.

Tan Qizhi’s smile was almost falling off his face. “You must be joking, Young Marquess. This wouldn’t upset my wife.”

“You can never be sure,” Lu Wancheng chuckled. “In my opinion, for the sake of Tan-xiong’s marital harmony, we should forget about drinking today. Next time, though, for sure.”

Lu Wancheng’s order that Tan Qizhi leave was clear even to six-year-old Lin Qinghe—never mind the adults. The little boy looked up at his mother and asked, “Mother, is he going?”

His mother was a bit chagrined. “Well…”

However thick-skinned he was, Tan Qizhi—the self-proclaimed scholar—had to find a way to make things less awkward. “This is the first time Qingyu-xiong has returned home after his wedding; it truly is inappropriate for me, an outsider, to be here. I’ll take my leave now and come spend time with my master and the young marquess another day.”

Lin Qingyu’s father was already unhappy with Tan Qizhi over what he’d said before. He didn’t bother trying to make the younger man stay, instead ordering Huantong to see him off.

As Tan Qizhi walked to the door, Lu Wancheng’s voice floated over: “I almost forgot—Qingyu left in a rush today and forgot five carriages of gifts. Luckily, I realized in time and ordered someone to bring them over. The carriages should be outside now.”

Tan Qizhi gritted his teeth, yanking the jade pendant off his waist sash.

Those at the table were seated according to seniority. Lin Qingyu’s father sat in the place of honor, next to Lin Qingyu’s mother, and Lin Qingyu himself sat next to Lu Wancheng. One of them was whispering while the other listened attentively, as if they were talking about something that others shouldn’t hear, resembling an intimate newlywed couple. Lin Qingyu’s parents exchanged complicated looks.

Little did they know that the conversation went something like this:

“Who told you to bring these things? Take them back later,” Lin Qingyu muttered.

“I know you see gifts from the marquess’s residence as dirty, but these can be sold for silver,” Lu Wancheng retorted. “Why would you oppose obtaining more silver? When I die, you can enjoy a happy life with the Lu family’s money and even take a concubine or wife. Wouldn’t it be nice to see them crying during a visit to my

grave?"

Imagining such a scene, Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes. "Have someone move everything into the residence," he ordered a servant.

Lu Wancheng happily reached out to grab the plum-blossom cake he'd been eyeing for a while. "Good, good."

After they finished eating, Lin Qingyu's father was the first to ask, "Young Marquess, I've heard about your condition before. Would you trust me to take a look?"

Lu Wancheng acted surprised. "That would be more than I could ever wish for."

"Come with me."

Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng into his father's study. After his father had washed his hands, he took out a small wrist rest made of warm jade and set it under Lu Wancheng's wrist, then closed his eyes and felt for the young nobleman's pulse.

A momentary hush fell over the room; Lin Qingyu's father's expression was unreadable. After checking Lu Wancheng's pulse, he asked him some questions, which Lu Wancheng answered truthfully.

Eventually, Lin Qingyu's father said, "The young marquess was born with this condition. The symptoms are easy to treat, but not the cause. You must rest well and take care of yourself; avoid worrying or working too much."

His vague words were nothing new. Lu Wancheng didn't ask any further questions. He smiled, looking a bit tired. "Thank you, Father-in-Law."

"The guest room has been tidied. Please rest there, Young Marquess. Qingyu, stay here," his father instructed.

Lin Qingyu nodded and had a servant usher Lu Wancheng out.

When he was gone, Lin Qingyu's father asked, "Have you taken his pulse?"

"I have."

"What do you think?"

"Lu Wancheng is lucky to be alive at nineteen. He's barely -hanging on by a thread now, and when that thread is gone, he will be too."

His father nodded in agreement. "How long do you think he has?"

"Half a year."

For a moment, his father quieted. Then he said, "I know a method that may give him a year. But its side effects are major and could increase his pain."

"What method?" Lin Qingyu asked impulsively.

His father met his gaze. "I can write the prescription later. The thing is…do you *want* him to live an extra half year?"

Did he even need to ask? The faster Lu Wancheng died, the sooner Lin Qingyu would be free. Half a year was a long time, and he didn't have the patience to wait that long.

So…of course he didn't want that.

Distracted, Lin Qingyu left the study and bumped into his mother, who was bringing his father tea and refreshments. She told him that Lu Wancheng was already

resting in the guest room.

"Do you want to see him?" she asked.

"I don't need to. Let him rest."

His mother hesitated before asking, "Qingyu, is the young marquess…good to you?"

"It doesn't matter," Lin Qingyu said lightly. "This farce of a marriage will only last six months regardless."

Lin Qingyu planned to bring another chest of medical books back to the marquess of Nan'an's residence after this visit. As he entered his own study, he saw Tan Qizhi and Huantong by the entrance to the room, looking around.

"Why haven't you left yet?" he asked Tan Qizhi, frowning.

Huantong explained, "Young Master Tan says he lost his jade pendant in the house, so I'm helping him look for it."

"You could have looked for it in the front hall. If you came to my study, you must have something to say to me."

Tan Qizhi didn't refute him. "I can't hide anything from you, Qingyu-xiong. To be honest, I suddenly remembered something important, but I couldn't go back and disturb you. Thus, I used the jade pendant as an excuse to await you here."

Lin Qingyu didn't want to waste words on him. "Go ahead."

"Qingyu-xiong, you know that the entrance examination for the Imperial Academy of Medicine is fast approaching," Tan Qizhi said, looking pained. "I'm not feeling confident."

Lin Qingyu knew that Tan Qizhi was poking at his sore spot, trying to rub salt into the wound. He had to admit that it was a clever move—being unable to take the Imperial Academy of Medicine's entrance examination was still an ache in his heart that suffocated him when touched.

But that didn't mean *anyone* could flaunt it in front of him.

"That's natural, since you failed three years ago," he remarked.

This time, Tan Qizhi's sore spot had been poked. He gritted his teeth and forced a smile. "This time, I've studied hard night and day—relentlessly," he said.

"The slow-witted need to start early; diligence can make up for ineptitude. You've done well," Lin Qingyu mock-praised him.

Tan Qizhi couldn't handle any more. His expression turned as dark as the bottom of a pot.

Lin Qingyu seemed to be both exulting and taunting him with every word. Someone as immensely gifted as Lin Qingyu had no idea how much normal people needed to sacrifice to catch up.

"At least I can take the exam again this year," Tan Qizhi said, staring intently at Lin Qingyu. "I know you have a lot of medical books in your collection. Since you won't be using them anymore, why not lend me a couple? If I pass the exam, I'll thank you profusely."

Lin Qingyu looked up. "Would you even understand my books?" he asked. "Huantong, see him out." Then he turned around and left.

In the blink of an eye, the sky was dark. The driver from the marquess's manor passed on a message that it was time to return home.

Lin Qingyu's mother put some snacks she'd prepared into a box for him to take back. "When we were eating, I noticed that the young marquess likes plum-blossom cakes, so I packed a few extra. It's cold today, so the cakes won't spoil too easily, even if they're out for a while."

"He probably likes eating anything."

She smiled gently. "He hasn't gotten up yet. You should wake him."

When Lin Qingyu entered the guest room, he saw Lu Wancheng already awake, lying on the bed with his eyes open.

"When did you wake up?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"About an hour ago."

"What are you doing, then?"

Lu Wancheng wrapped himself in a quilt, leaving only his eyes uncovered to stare at Lin Qingyu. "Just lazing around in bed," he said, his voice muffled. "It's cold outside, so I don't want to get up. I want to be a quilt."

Lin Qingyu took immediate action. Grabbing a corner of the real quilt, he yanked it upward. "I'm not your maid," he said coldly. "This trick won't work on me."

Lu Wancheng got up. Despite having his quilt ripped away, he wasn't upset. "What trick? I wasn't tricking you…" Noticing that Lin Qingyu's expression seemed a bit off, he asked, "Didn't Tan Qizhi leave? Who pissed you off now?"

"No one."

Lu Wancheng blinked a few times. "Oh."

Lin Qingyu tried to remain silent but couldn't hold back. "Tan Qizhi is preparing for the Imperial Academy of Medicine examination. He asked to borrow my books."

Lu Wancheng laughed. "That's all?"

Lin Qingyu's glare was sharp as a knife.

Lu Wancheng tried to reason with him. "Tan Qizhi isn't as good as a single hair on your head. If you waste your anger on him, you'll be lowering yourself. Treat him like a joke, or tease him. At least you'll have some fun that way."

"I know that," Lin Qingyu laughed self-deprecatingly. "But he's such a mediocre man. A few years ago, he couldn't even tell the difference between tiankuizi and xiangfu.[5] Yet he's allowed to take the exam, and I'm not. Ridiculous."

Helplessly, Lu Wancheng replied, "Yes. And it's all the fault of the marquess of Nan'an's household. I'll try to die faster so you'll be widowed before the entrance exam, all right?"

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes, quiet. His long, thick eyelashes trembled slightly.

Lu Wancheng was silent too for a while, then laughed. "All right. Don't be angry anymore. Visiting home will be rare for you, so be happy and smile a little more, won't you?"

"I've never liked smiling," Lin Qingyu said indifferently.

“Hey—why are you getting more upset? I know a saying that might be helpful to you. I’ll tell it to you.”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Just listen. It’s not tiring to listen.”

Lin Qingyu rubbed his forehead. “If you want to tell me, then tell me. Why do you need to talk so much nonsense?”

“‘Don’t compare yourself to others.’” Lu Wancheng’s gaze was sincere.

Lin Qingyu didn’t know what to say.

Chapter 7

WHEN EVERYTHING WAS PACKED, Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng bade farewell to Lin Qingyu's parents and returned to the marquess's manor.

The entire Lin household escorted them to the gate. Lu Wancheng got into the carriage first so that Lin Qingyu and his family could have a proper goodbye.

Though the Lin residence and the marquess of Nan'an's residence were both in the capital, it wasn't easy for Lin Qingyu to return home; he was required to obtain the marchioness's permission, and he could only go a few times a year.

His mother was reluctant to let him go, her eyes rimmed with red. Lin Qinghe held his brother's hand and didn't want to release it. But Huantong—who had grown up with Lin Qingyu—was the most emotional.

When Lin Qingyu married, Huantong had wanted to follow him to the marquess's manor, but Lin Qingyu had made him remain at the Lin residence so his future wouldn't be ruined. Huantong was an orphan; in his earliest memories, he had already been sold to the Lin manor. Following and serving the young master were the only things he knew how to do. Since Lin Qingyu was no longer at the residence, he was at loose ends; he felt muddle-headed all day, as if he had lost his purpose in life.

Now that Lin Qingyu had finally returned, Huantong cried and sniffled, wanting to follow Lin Qingyu back to the marquess's residence no matter what. He even begged Lin Qingyu's mother to persuade him.

"You don't have anyone you can trust at the marquess's manor," she said. "You should take Huantong. Your father and I would feel more at ease too."

Lin Qingyu reconsidered it and finally nodded. "Huantong, pack your things and get in the carriage."

Only then did Huantong's tears turn into laughter.

Lin Qingyu got into the carriage and informed Lu Wancheng about Huantong. Lu Wancheng smiled casually. "That's good," he said. "There are only girls at Lanfeng Pavilion. Having another boy will be nice."

Lin Qingyu sighed. "You know he's a young man. I don't want him to be trapped in the inner chambers like me."

Lu Wancheng objected. "What's wrong with being in the inner chambers? To someone like you, who has grand ambitions, 'trapped' describes it. But for me? The inner chambers are full of food and drink, and I don't need to work. They're paradise."

Lin Qingyu suddenly lost interest in the conversation. "People on different paths can't make plans together."

The carriage started moving, and Lin Qingyu looked through the window to watch his family slowly disappear.

"Bye-bye, Gege." Lin Qinghe said as he waved his little hand. When he saw Lu Wancheng, he mustered up the courage to say, "Bye-bye, Wancheng-gege."

Lu Wancheng cracked a smile. "Bye-bye, little Qinghe." Closing the carriage window, he told Lin Qingyu, "Your brother seems to like me a lot."

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Qinghe has had a bad habit of judging others by their appearance since he was quite small. I tried to set him straight a bunch of different ways, but he still prefers being around good-looking people.”

The corner of Lu Wancheng’s mouth lifted. “I think I heard someone praise me as good-looking.”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes swept him over. “You’re…all right.” Though he didn’t agree with Lu Wancheng’s way of doing things, his face received passing marks.

Lu Wancheng was a bit startled. He hadn’t thought that Lin Qingyu would say anything good about him, and he began to act humble. “You’re exaggerating, number-one beauty.”

“I’m not praising you, just telling the truth. Who’s the ‘number one beauty’?”

“You.”

Lin Qingyu furrowed his brow. “That beggars belief. The world is vast, and there are all sorts of beings in it. Who can guarantee that you’ve seen all of them? If you haven’t seen them all, then how do you know which is the prettiest?”

Lu Wancheng’s eyes curved as he smiled. “*Someone’s* seen it all, and she told me.”

Lin Qingyu, of course, didn’t believe such nonsense. “Absurd.”

Lu Wancheng’s smile didn’t fade. He stroked his chin. “She even told me that my face is ranked in the top five of the novel—in the Great Yu Empire, I mean. But I think it’s just average—worse than my old one…”

He was starting to speak nonsense again. Lin Qingyu closed his eyes to relax, letting Lu Wancheng babble on.

If things had gone as Lin Qingyu imagined, Lady Liang would already know that Lu Wancheng brought the Lin residence five carriages’ worth of gifts. What would she think? Would she cause trouble?

Logically, it had nothing to do with Lin Qingyu; if Lady Liang wanted to find someone to blame, it should be her son. But she always seemed to dote on him; she probably wouldn’t argue with him about it. When Lin Qingyu went to greet her tomorrow, she would likely remind him of the gifts indirectly.

That thought annoyed Lin Qingyu.

Back at the marquess of Nan’an’s residence, Lu Wancheng was carried out of the carriage, still drowsy. Huantong pushed his wheelchair; he followed behind Lin Qingyu, looking around curiously. By the time they were about to arrive at Lanfeng Pavilion, Lu Wancheng was mostly awake.

“I think we went the wrong way,” he said, yawning. This was obviously the way back to Lanfeng Pavilion.

“Ignore him,” Lin Qingyu told Huantong. “Keep going.”

Lu Wancheng set his elbow on the wheelchair’s armrest and leaned his head against his hand. “Don’t the rules require us to greet my mother after coming back from the Lin residence before we return to our room?”

Lin Qingyu stopped walking for a moment and turned to look at him. “The rules require you to wake up early every day to pay your respects to her. Did you do that today?”

“No,” Lu Wancheng said, resisting his exhaustion. “So, since I’m awake now, we should go.”

Lin Qingyu was suspicious of his intentions. Usually, when Lady Liang came to Lanfeng Pavilion to visit Lu Wancheng, her son either said a few things half-heartedly or claimed he didn’t want to see anyone because he didn’t feel well. He’d never paid respects to her in the morning either. The kind of relationship this mother and son had was obvious.

Lu Wancheng had left the residence for the day despite his illness and ridden in a carriage for several hours. He was clearly exhausted, but he was the one who’d brought up greeting Lady Liang. Could it be that…?

Lin Qingyu had a vague guess. “Since the young marquess is feeling filial, let’s go.”

As they arrived at Lady Liang’s courtyard, she had just eaten her evening snack. When she heard that they’d come to pay their respects, however, she had someone prepare tea and refreshments.

Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng inside to greet her. Seeing Lu Wancheng’s fatigue, Lady Liang felt sorry for him. “It’s customary for a husband to accompany his wife home, but Wancheng is still ill. If he hadn’t gone, the Lin family should have understood.”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Qingyu said the same thing. To prevent me from going, he even left without telling me. Do you think he should be punished, Mother?”

Lin Qingyu raised his eyebrows.

Lady Liang looked at him, paused for a moment, then softly said, “Qingyu was thinking of your illness. What is there to punish?”

Lu Wancheng chuckled and said, “If you say so, Mother, he won’t be. But you can’t leave me behind again, Qingyu.”

Lin Qingyu’s emotions were complicated. “All right.”

Lu Wancheng chatted with Lady Liang about their family for a bit, then casually mentioned the gifts marking Lin Qingyu’s return. “I selected Qingyu’s return gifts from my birth mother’s dowry. That’s why I didn’t tell you in advance, Mother. You don’t mind, do you?”

Lady Liang smiled and took a sip of tea. “She left those things for you, so you can do with them what you will.”

Lin Qingyu had heard rumors that Lady Liang wasn’t Lu Wancheng’s birth mother. Apparently, his biological mother had been the marquess of Nan’an’s first wife, the daughter of Duke Wen—the most powerful person in the capital. The duke had had two daughters; one had married into the marquess of Nan’an’s manor, and the other was now empress.

Born into the marquess’s family and from a significant maternal line, Lu Wancheng had a promising future. Unfortunately, his mother had died of blood loss giving birth to him, and he was born weak and sickly. At that point, the physicians had said that he wouldn’t live past twenty.

The marquess of Nan’an had pitied his eldest son. He’d spent an enormous amount of effort to try and cure his illness, but he didn’t dare demand as much of him as he would have of a normal son; he feared that that Lu Wancheng couldn’t bear the

hardship of studying. Later, the marquess married Lady Liang so someone would take care of the manor, and they had a son and daughter together.

Lady Liang had raised Lu Wancheng since he was a child, and she'd always put him first. She wasn't his birth mother, but she was even better—at least, that's what the matchmaker had told Lin Qingyu before he married into the family.

Returning from Lady Liang's, Lu Wancheng had reached his limit. He lay down immediately after taking his medicine. Lin Qingyu also rested, reclining on the soft divan. The screen with the mandarin ducks playing in the water still separated them.

Lin Qingyu thought back on everything that had happened that day and couldn't resist asking, "Young Marquess, are you asleep?"

Lu Wancheng's voice floated from behind the screen. "I'm not. What, would you like a candlelight chat?"

"You're actually not stupid," Lin Qingyu said slowly.

"Of course not," Lu Wancheng said, amused. "What are you talking about? I've always been at the top of my class."

Lin Qingyu didn't believe it. "Someone as lazy as you?"

Lu Wancheng's voice faded a bit. "Um…a hatred for studying can exist alongside top marks."

"How so?"

"Well, I hate doing some things, but I know doing them will be good for me. So I can make myself do them. Studying is one of them, and so is paying my respects in the morning."

Lin Qingyu thought about that. "But you've been ill since birth—when did you get the opportunity to study with others?"

He waited for a bit but didn't receive a response, so he knew that Lu Wancheng had fallen asleep.

When the first month of the year ended, the weather slowly began to get warmer, and midwinter—the most difficult time for an invalid—was over. As soon as the days warmed, Lu Wancheng's health improved greatly, and he no longer needed a wheelchair to go inside and out. Other than sleeping, he liked walking with his pet bird, appreciating the flowers, playing pitch-pot, watching theater…basically, anything that made him happy without requiring him to move much.

Today, Lin Qingyu was in the study, preparing medicine according to a prescription—the one his father had written the day Lin Qingyu went home. He wanted to figure out what was miraculous about it, but he hadn't yet decided whether he would give it to Lu Wancheng. Several toxic drugs in the prescription could cause a patient additional agony, and he wondered whether milder drugs could replace those ingredients.

The crisp chirp of a bird, melodious and pleasing to the ear, interrupted his thoughts. That sound was enjoyable when he was relaxing, but it annoyed him when he was trying to concentrate.

Lin Qingyu attempted to ignore it at first, closing his eyes to calm down. But the chirping was endless, and it was accompanied by laughter. He couldn't bear it anymore, so he stood and opened the window to icily address someone walking with

a pet bird.

"Please quiet your bird, Young Marquess."

Lu Wancheng looked back at him, a golden birdcage in hand. Huantong was near him; a group of beautiful girls also surrounded him. They were all maids from Lanfeng Pavilion who had been lured over by the laughingthrush's song. Behind Lu Wancheng, a splendid peach tree was in early bloom.

"Physician Lin," Lu Wancheng said through the window as the spring breeze passed by. There was a smile in his words. "Do you want to come play with my bird?"

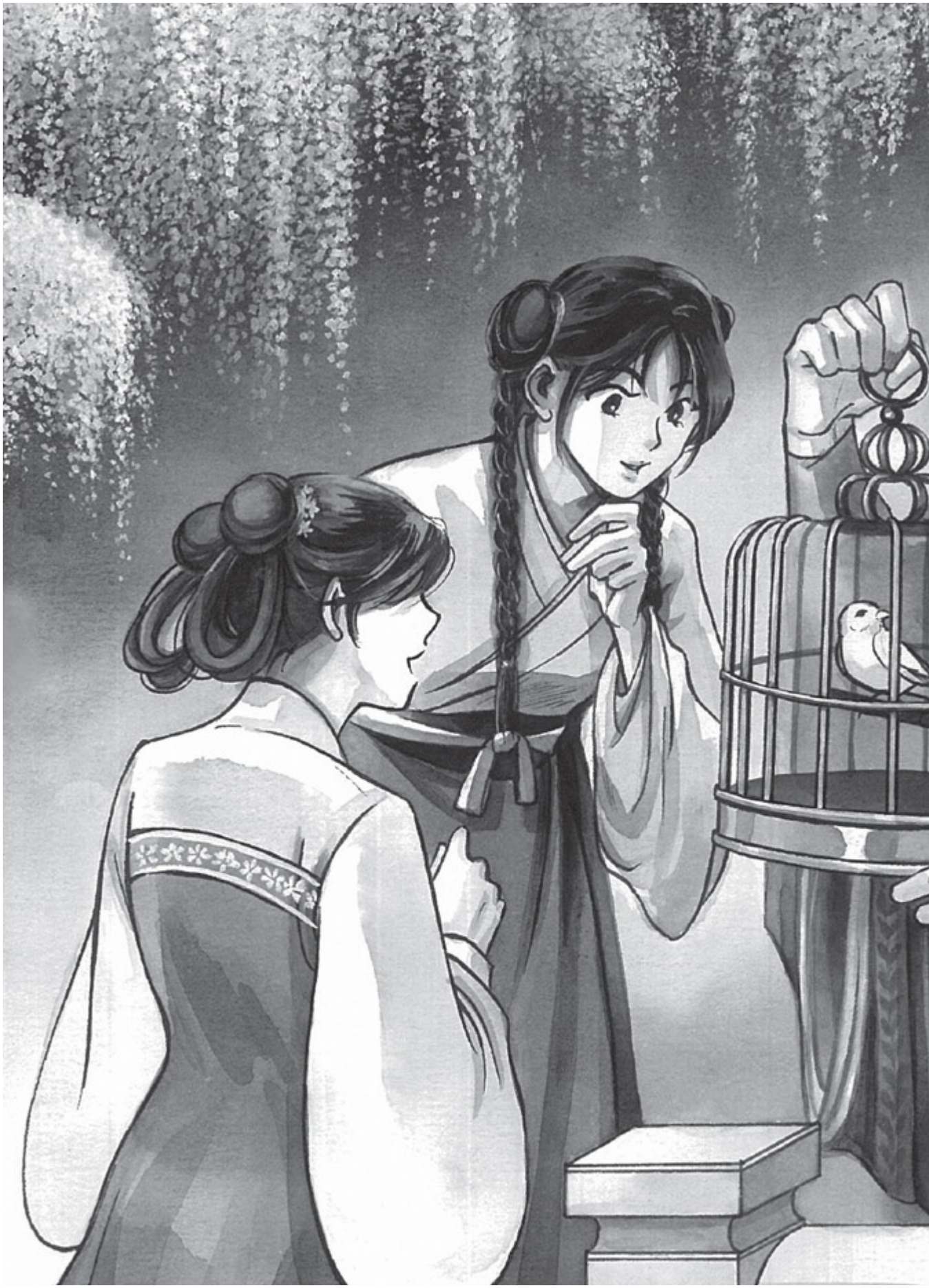
Lu Wancheng's complexion was still sickly pale; he was thin and handsome, with a lazy, lenient look like a handsome drunkard. It gave Lin Qingyu an unusual feeling. For some reason, he felt as though Lu Wancheng shouldn't look so frail; rather, he should be a hale young man who rode a horse so valiantly that women waved their sleeves at him.

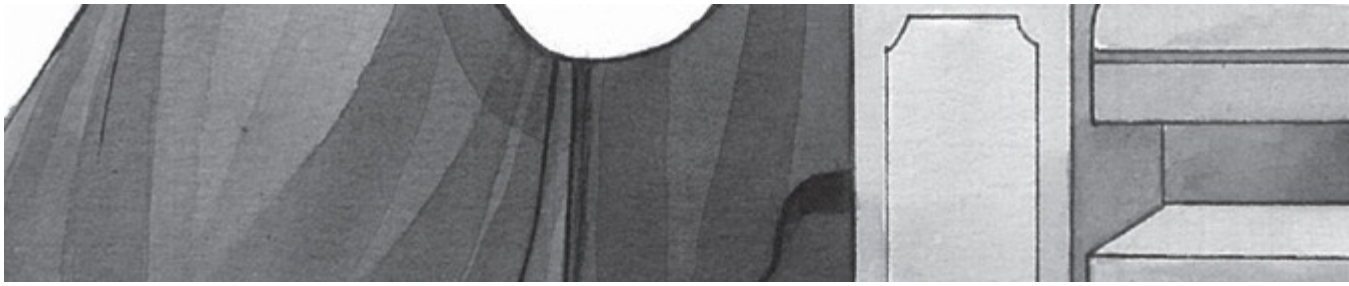
"I'm busy," Lin Qingyu said. "Can you keep it down?"

"I'm sorry. But you've been in the study for most of the day, so it's time to take a break," Lu Wancheng replied.

Huantong agreed. "Yeah, Young Master. It's a beautiful day today, so come listen to the laughingthrush with us."

"I will forget my ambitions if I stop to play. My apologies, but I cannot keep you company." Lin Qingyu shut the window with a thud.





Lu Wancheng looked regretful. “Your young master is so boring. He scolds me for my lethargy, yet he clearly likes staying inside more than I do.”

Although Huantong was having fun with Lu Wancheng, he still supported his own master. “That’s because we’re in the marquess’s manor. At the Lin residence, Young Master wasn’t like this.”

Lu Wancheng recalled that Lin Qingyu had followed his master for years as he practiced medicine throughout the empire. He smiled. “You’re right. And even if he’s uninteresting, I think…”

Before he could finish, a loud crash came from the study. Everyone rushed to the door. They opened it only to see Lin Qingyu leaning against a bookshelf, a fallen stool and medical books scattered around him.

“Young Master, are you all right?” Huantong anxiously asked.

“I’m fine,” Lin Qingyu said steadily. “I just missed the step putting my book away.” Seeing the group surrounding the door, he looked a bit uncomfortable. “None of you have anything better to do?”

Lu Wancheng held his arm, helping him up, and smiled. “Don’t be embarrassed. A beauty is still beautiful when he falls.”

“I didn’t fall. But I sprained something.” Lin Qingyu couldn’t suppress a groan as he felt a sharp pain begin. “Help me to the bedroom. There’s medicine there.”

“How are you going to walk like this? I’ll carry you,” Lu Wancheng said.

Lin Qingyu was shocked. “You’ll…what?”

What was wrong with him? Had he suddenly forgotten his weak body?

Placing his hand on Lin Qingyu’s waist, Lu Wancheng tried to lift him. Then, his expression changed a bit, his body swayed violently, and he almost collapsed along with the man in his arms. Luckily, Huantong was there to stabilize him.

Lin Qingyu’s face paled with pain. “Please don’t make this worse.”

Lu Wancheng looked down at his hands, feeling shaken for the first time. “I’m not…”

“Let me do it, Young Marquess! I’m strong!” Huantong exclaimed.

Lu Wancheng watched as Huantong easily put Lin Qingyu on his back and then ran for the bedroom. Abruptly, he laughed. “Fuck.”

Chapter 8

HUANTONG CARRIED Lin Qingyu into the bedroom and set him down on the soft divan. Lin Qingyu instructed him to take out the medicine chest in the cabinet and look for the sprain treatment.

Seeing Lin Qingyu sweating from the pain, Hualu asked worriedly, “Should we find a physician for the young lord?”

Huantong took off Lin Qingyu’s shoes. “What are you talking about? My young master is the best physician.”

Lin Qingyu poured some of the treatment into his palm, then slathered it onto his sprained ankle. The tincture’s light scent wafted through the room.

“Should I help you rub it in, Young Lord?” Hualu inquired. “I’m great at massages.”

“No need,” Lin Qingyu said, bearing with the pain. “Get a basin of well water and soak a towel. I need to apply a cold compress for an hour after the treatment.”

Rubbing his wound, Lin Qingyu suddenly sensed that the room was too quiet. Where had the biggest chatterbox gone? He looked up and saw Lu Wancheng seated at the table, his expression gloomy and unhappy.

Remembering that Lu Wancheng had almost collapsed earlier, Lin Qingyu asked, “Are you hurt?”

Lu Wancheng shook his head. “How’s your sprain?”

“It’s not a big deal. I’ll recover with three days of rest.”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “That’s good.”

“I only needed two days at first,” Lin Qingyu added lightly, “but then you threw me like that…”

Lu Wancheng covered his face, embarrassed. “Stop. I was mistaken, all right?”

To compensate for his blunder, Lu Wancheng offered to let Lin Qingyu use his wheelchair, but Lin Qingyu didn’t want it. Instead, he asked Huantong to serve him and fetch whatever he wanted. When he needed to walk, he asked Huantong for help.

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At one point, Hualu was giving Lu Wancheng his medicine when they saw Lin Qingyu, dressed in white and supported by Huantong. Lin Qingyu walked slowly, holding the table with one hand. His long hair fell over his shoulders and his brow was slightly furrowed, making the young girl pity him.

“Does he look handsome?” Lu Wancheng asked casually.

Hualu nodded, honest. “He does! The young lord seems different when he’s injured.”

Watching Lin Qingyu, Lu Wancheng drank his bitter medicine in one gulp. “That’s what we call a ‘war-torn beauty.’”[6]

When night fell, Lin Qingyu read a book on the divan as usual. He occasionally heard rustling from the bed behind the screen, which interrupted his thoughts. Usually, Lu Wancheng was dead asleep by this time of night, but for whatever reason, something was off today.

Hearing another sigh, Lin Qingyu remarked, “Fame and fortune are uninteresting to you, Young Marquess, and so are gains and losses. What in the world could make you frown and sigh so deep into the night?”

After a silence, Lu Wancheng’s shadow slowly sat up on the screen. “I can’t even fucking lift you…?” he asked in despair.

Lin Qingyu was speechless. Lu Wancheng couldn’t sleep because of *that*?

“It’s even scarier than a ghost story,” Lu Wancheng continued quietly.

That piqued Lin Qingyu’s curiosity. “You assumed you could lift me? Where did your confidence come from?”

“Your waist is so thin. You shouldn’t be that heavy. How come I couldn’t pick you up?” Lu Wancheng didn’t understand.

Lin Qingyu couldn’t be bothered to worry about Lu Wancheng’s strange insecurity. “Given your body’s current state, being able to walk is good enough,” he said frankly. “Just doing that, you’ll start panting after a while. Even Hualu is stronger than you. It’s important to understand your own limits, Young Marquess.”

“It’s so frustrating.” Lu Wancheng slammed his hand down on the bed. “Even Huantong can do it, so why can’t I?”

“Huantong labors year-round. Why compare yourself to him?”

Lu Wancheng angrily got off the bed, pulled on a fox-fur coat, and emerged from behind the screen. “I’m taller than him.”

Lin Qingyu set down his book and looked at Lu Wancheng. “Young Marquess.”

“What?”

“Don’t compare yourself to others,” Lin Qingyu said, imitating Lu Wancheng’s intonation perfectly.

Lu Wancheng, stunned speechless for a moment, lost the will to object to what he’d said. When he saw Lu Wancheng’s awkward expression, Lin Qingyu couldn’t stop the corners of his mouth from lifting.

Lin Qingyu actually smiled often, but most of the time, those smiles were a sneer or a smirk of ridicule. This was the first time Lu Wancheng had seen such a mischievous smile on the young physician.

In the dim light, Lin Qingyu sat half upright on the divan, a book in hand, his black hair loose across his chest. Smiling at Lu Wancheng, he looked completely unguarded and engaged.

Lu Wancheng suddenly understood what it meant to be a beauty on the inside, not just the outside. He unconsciously lowered his voice, almost as if he were afraid to disturb Lin Qingyu. “Does it…still hurt?”

“Not too badly.” Lin Qingyu returned his attention to his book.

Lu Wancheng sat down next to the divan. “You’re a patient too now. Sleep in the bed.”

“No need,” Lin Qingyu said, thinking that Lu Wancheng wanted to switch with him. “Your illness is more serious than my sprain.”

“So I’ll sleep in the bed too,” Lu Wancheng said readily.

Lin Qingyu’s fingertips paused. Then he simply said, “No.”

“Neither of us is homosexual, so what is there to be afraid of? You said before that you slept alongside other men when you traveled.”

“I’m afraid you’ll sleep on my hair.” Lin Qingyu turned the page calmly.

Lu Wancheng had never imagined that Lin Qingyu would use *that* excuse to reject his suggestion. He couldn’t help but laugh. “You’ve never shared the bed with me before, so why do you think I’ll sleep on your hair?”

“Because you have terrible sleeping habits.”

“At least try it out. After trying, you’ll know.”

“No.”

“Isn’t this excessive?” Lu Wancheng scolded. “You can’t conflate the real me and the me in your mind…”

Lin Qingyu looked up at him, pretending to be stern. “Young Marquess, if you keep babbling, I can render you unable to speak for three days. Do you believe me?”

“I believe you. Why wouldn’t I?” Lu Wancheng drawled. He lay back down on the bed. “You’re an exquisite but dangerous beauty who dared take action against the Eastern Palace. You can do anything.”

When Lady Liang found out about Lin Qingyu’s injury, she sent a maid to ask after him, so that it would look as though she cared. Another unfamiliar maid had come to Lanfeng Pavilion and given Lin Qingyu several ointment patches; she’d said that the ointment was the secret recipe of their concubine’s family, and that it was very good for sprains.

“*Your* concubine?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“Concubine Pan from Mianyue Pavilion,” the maid said, smiling. “You haven’t met her yet, Young Lord.”

Unlike the residences of other noble families in the capital, the marquess of Nan’an’s inner chambers only housed a handful of people. In addition to his wife, the marquess had a few concubines. Lady Liang managed the household well, so the concubines knew their place. Though Lin Qingyu was the male wife of the household, he was still a man and different from a woman. He wouldn’t see the concubines unless it was the New Year or some other special occasion.

Sniffing the ointment, Lin Qingyu determined that it was a good one. Then again, he’d never met Concubine Pan, and he didn’t want to owe her anything.

He was about to refuse the ointment patches when Lu Wancheng came out from the hall and said, “Leave those here, and give Concubine Pan our thanks.”

With others there, Lin Qingyu didn’t say anything to Lu Wancheng.

After the maid left, Lu Wancheng spoke up without waiting for Lin Qingyu to say anything: “Concubine Pan doesn’t have any ulterior motives. She’s a timid, honest person. Be civil to her, and maybe she’ll be on your side in the future.”

“You never ask about the affairs of the inner chamber, so how do you know who’s good or bad, Young Marquess?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Fibbing a little, Lu Wancheng responded, “Because I’m like the imperial preceptor—I can use the stars for divination.”

Lin Qingyu had been married into the marquess’s household for a while now. He knew that though Lu Wancheng seemed unreliable, he held no ill intentions toward Lin Qingyu. There were hundreds of people in the manor, yet only Lu Wancheng deserved his trust. He did want to get along with Lu Wancheng, but…the young marquess couldn’t be serious for even an hour at a time! When would he break his bad habit of speaking nonsense?

“Go look at the stars, then,” Lin Qingyu said. “Don’t bother me.”

Lu Wancheng pretended he didn’t hear Lin Qingyu’s request to leave. Instead, he fiddled with the ointment patches Concubine Pan had sent over. “Do you remember the acupuncture bag I wanted to give you before—the one you ruthlessly rejected? That was the wedding gift from Concubine Pan. She made it herself.”

That surprised Lin Qingyu a bit. “Really?” Did Concubine Pan’s repeated kindnesses simply stem from good intentions, or did she want something else?

Lin Qingyu was deep in thought when he felt Lu Wancheng lift his ankle. Confused, he looked up to meet Lu Wancheng’s gaze. “What are you doing?”

“Sticking on an ointment patch.”

Lin Qingyu was startled. “I don’t need it. Let go.”

“You’re welcome.” Lu Wancheng held his ankle firmly, not letting him move. “I’m great at sticking things on. I promise it’ll be pretty.”

“Go away.” Using only half his strength, Lin Qingyu easily broke free from Lu Wancheng’s grip, then left the room with Huantong’s support.

Lu Wancheng watched his back recede, his gaze full of resentment, feeling like he was about to suffocate.

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Lin Qingyu’s sprain healed after three days of rest. Tired of listening to the laughingthrush, Lu Wancheng had procured a myna bird from somewhere, teaching it to imitate words and to be quite annoying in general. Lin Qingyu couldn’t take it anymore and left for an open garden space outside Lanfeng Pavilion, bringing Huantong along. He wanted to take advantage of the beautiful spring weather and dry some herbs.

Huantong spread the herbs out. “Young Master, the garden in Lanfeng Pavilion is large, and the sun is bright; why aren’t we drying these there?”

“It’s too noisy, and there’s one bird too many.”

Huantong smiled. “I think it’s quite fun there. The young marquess has been teaching the bird to say ‘Physician Lin.’” When his young master initially prevented him from coming to the marquess’s manor, Huantong had assumed that life there was difficult. After arriving, however, he found that it was a rather happy life.

The young marquess was of high status, and he was always ill, so everything good was sent to their courtyard first. The courtyard's servants also enjoyed that benefit. The young marquess was an interesting person too; though his body was weak, he always found ways to have fun, and he treated Huantong's young master well. That was a blessing.

As they dried the herbs, Huantong saw a girl in pink robes -approaching them from a distance. "Young Master, who's that?"

Lin Qingyu looked over. The girl was followed by an auntie and a maid, so he guessed that she must be one of the masters of the manor. In the marquess of Nan'an's residence, there was only one master of her age: the second young lady of the household, Lu Wancheng's half sister, Lu Niantao.

Lu Niantao had a beautiful face, and she moved with a noblewoman's characteristic elegance. She walked slowly to Lin Qingyu, bowed, and said, "Hello, Sister-in-Law."

Lin Qingyu wanted to ignore Lady Liang's daughter, but Lu Niantao was a girl; it wouldn't hurt to show her some respect in front of the servants. He nodded slightly and said, "Second Young Lady Lu."

Lu Niantao smiled a little. "Just call me Niantao, Sister-in-Law. Truthfully, I've always wanted to visit you and my brother at Lanfeng Pavilion. Unfortunately, my brother is still sick and seemingly doesn't want to be bothered. Now we finally have the chance to meet. Sister-in-Law, it's just as the rumors say—you're an unparalleled beauty."

"You needn't call me Sister-in-Law, Second Young Lady Lu."

"But…you *are* my sister-in-law." Lu Niantao gave it some thought. "Well, how about I call you Lin-gege?"

Both terms of address made Lin Qingyu uncomfortable. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Call me Sister-in-Law, then."

"All right," Lu Niantao softly said. Then she noticed the herbs behind Lin Qingyu and asked, "Are you drying herbs, Sister-in-Law?"

"Yes."

Lu Niantao's heart skipped a beat. "Are they for my brother?"

All the herbs had been mentioned in Lin Qingyu's father's prescription. The medicine was difficult to concoct, and there were distinct, strict requirements for the preparation of each herb. From that point, the prescription would take a full month to finish. How could Lin Qingyu devote all his effort and time to Lu Wancheng…? Well, he was just practicing. And, of course, it would be all right to have Lu Wancheng sample the medicine once it was finished.

Lin Qingyu didn't respond, and Lu Niantao took that as agreement. "Since my elder brother was a child, Physician Zhang has taken care of his health. He has the final say in what medicine my brother should take."

Lin Qingyu ran out of patience. "What do you intend to say?"

"Don't misunderstand, Sister-in-Law," Lu Niantao said, seeming a little panicked. "I know that you're worried about my brother and want him to recover soon. But my brother's body is priceless, so we can't be careless. You may have been born into a famous medical family, but you should tell Physician Zhang before giving

medicine to my brother."

Upset, Huantong interjected, "Second Young Lady, my young master inherited his father's teachings and studied under a famed teacher. In terms of medicinal skill, this Physician Zhang may not rival him…"

Feeling that something was off, Lin Qingyu interrupted him: "Huantong."

Huantong fell silent, morose.

"These herbs aren't for the young marquess," Lin Qingyu continued. "You're worrying too much, Second Young Lady."

"Not for my brother? Then…"

"It's getting late," Lin Qingyu said, ignoring her. "Huantong, let's pack up and return to Lanfeng Pavilion."

When Lin Qingyu got back, Lu Wancheng's new favorite myna had learned how to call people's names. Lu Wancheng brought the bird to Lin Qingyu and walked in circles around him, the man and the myna alike calling out "Physician Lin!" until Lin Qingyu wanted to poison both.

"If you pester me with your bird again, I'll kill it and make it into soup," Lin Qingyu threatened.

"Mean Physician Lin," Lu Wancheng said, handing the birdcage to Hualu and gesturing for her to take it away. "After I'm dead, what maiden will want to marry *you*?"

Lin Qingyu replied icily, "You needn't worry about that, Young Marquess. I am certain I'll marry well, and I'll bring our children to your grave during Qingming."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "Don't forget to burn some paper money for me. I'm worried I won't have enough to spend down there."

"I'll burn some."

Having agreed to that, Lin Qingyu guided the discussion back to a serious topic, telling Lu Wancheng about his meeting with Lu Niantao in the garden. "Lu Niantao apparently wanted to visit you several times, but you refused her for various reasons. Is there something you know…?"

"Haven't I told you? I know a lot."

The herbs that Lin Qingyu had just finished drying were on the table. For some reason, Lu Wancheng grabbed a handful, then yelped when Lin Qingyu smacked him. Lin Qingyu asked, "Did the stars tell you to ignore her?"

"Yeah," Lu Wancheng said, blowing on his reddened hand. "The stars said that she isn't a good person, so I should steer clear of her."

"I see," Lin Qingyu replied, lost in thought.

Chapter 9

A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW HAD TO GO to a mother-in-law's room every morning, regardless of a household's size. Lin Qingyu hated doing that, but to keep Lady Liang from finding fault in him, he still went daily and faked pleasantries.

In the past, Lady Liang hadn't had much to say to him, since he wasn't forthcoming on the topics women usually discussed. Not knowing what to do with Lin Qingyu, she often just asked a couple of questions about Lu Wancheng's health, then allowed him to return to Lanfeng Pavilion.

But when Lin Qingyu entered the main hall that morning and saw Lady Liang sitting in the place of honor, he knew she had something to say.

As he expected, she had two cups of tea brought out. "Qingyu, it's been some time now since you married into the family," she said as she sipped.

Lin Qingyu didn't respond.

Lady Liang waited a moment, then continued, "Do you know the most important thing a wife must do?"

"I don't," Lin Qingyu replied coolly.

"The most important thing is, of course, to give birth to your husband's children. But…" Lady Liang sighed, looking regretful.

Lin Qingyu internally sneered at her. "I can't do that, Lady, but you may have the young marquess divorce me and marry someone who's capable."

Lady Liang was likely used to his icy words by now, so she wasn't perturbed when he objected. She smiled. "What are you saying? You're Wancheng's lucky charm; he has to be with you forever."

She observed Lin Qingyu's expression. Seeing that he was unmoved, she continued seriously, "They say that a wife should assist her husband and educate her children. You can't educate children at present, so you can only learn to assist your husband. You are the young lord of the manor, so you should learn to manage the household and share Wancheng's worries."

"Share the young marquess's worries?" Lin Qingyu laughed. "May I ask you, Lady, what those worries are? That his laughingthrush won't be able to sing anymore, or his myna will stop speaking? Or…is he worried about his illness?"

As Lin Qingyu expected, hearing the word "illness" made Lady Liang press her lips together unnaturally. "Physician Zhang will take care of Wancheng's illness, so you needn't concern yourself with it."

"If I remember correctly, the marquess asked that I look after his son's health as well. You were there when he made that request, Lady."

"Y-yes. He did ask that."

Lin Qingyu nodded slightly. "Then are you finished, Lady?"

Lady Liang's fists clenched, but she smiled. "Before you married into the family, the matchmaker said that the son of the head imperial physician of the Department of Imperial Physicians was not only exceptionally handsome but also

gifted, intelligent, and extraordinary, with an eidetic memory. The more capable someone is, the more they should do. You're clever, so managing the household and Wancheng's health at the same time won't be difficult for you."

Lady Liang then summoned a servant. An elderly woman came in—Auntie Liu, who had been punished with hard labor a month earlier. She presented Lin Qingyu with a stack of thick accounting books, saying, "Please take a look, Young Lord."

Picking up the top volume, Lin Qingyu said calmly, "Only a month has passed since I last saw you, yet you've aged a lot, haven't you, Auntie Liu? I'm afraid that hard labor isn't easy."

She forced a smile. "I made a mistake, so my punishment was deserved."

"These are the account books for the month. You can try sorting them out first, and then you can ask me about anything you don't understand," Lady Liang said warmly. "They'll be a lot of work, but with your skills… How about I give you three days? Sort them out, then return the books to me three days from now."

Before Lin Qingyu could say anything, Auntie Liu interjected, "The lady is giving you this honor because she favors you, Young Lord."

"Of course," Lady Liang agreed, a smile spreading across her face. "I'm getting old, and I wish to live in ease. In the future, we'll need to rely on Qingyu to manage this massive residence."

The play the lady and servant were putting on wasn't very good, but they did have logic on their side. Whomever you asked, they'd say that the lady giving the management of the household to the young lord meant that she was generous and trusted him. If he refused, he would seem ungrateful and thus unworthy of being her son's wife.

The problem was, did Lady Liang *really* want Lin Qingyu to manage the household?

How could she? Unlike Lu Wancheng's biological mother, Lady Liang was of ordinary birth; her father was only a fourth-rank assistant minister. Thus, she still had to be cautious in front of the marquess of Nan'an. The marquess's first wife had left behind an eldest son, and Lady Liang's own son was useless, so managing the household was the only duty she could rely on.

Lin Qingyu had no interest in gaining power in the marquess's manor. Still, the prospect of seeing Lady Liang regret her decision and end up blaming herself interested him a bit.

"I'm thankful for your kindness, Lady," he said, tossing the account book in his hand back onto the stack. "I'll take all of these."

Lady Liang nodded, relieved. "Don't let me down, Qingyu."

As soon as he left, the gentleness disappeared completely from Lady Liang's face. "He agreed so easily."

Auntie Liu glanced sidelong at the door. "The young lord seems as unflappable as an immortal, but he still cares about his inheritance from the marquess of Nan'an."

Lady Liang shook her head. "He wants nothing but to enter the Imperial Academy of Medicine. I wouldn't say he's that sort of person."

“How is he not? Lady, you can’t judge a book by its cover. You must be on guard—don’t let him take away the powerful role of managing the household.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Lady Liang drawled. “I asked someone to investigate, and I found out that he’d never even dabbled in the Lin household’s accounts. No matter how gifted he is, he can’t devote his efforts to both medicine and accounting at the same time, so we’ll see which he wants to give up. As for managing the household… In the end, that power will remain mine.”

Auntie Liu, enraptured, said, “How wise you are, Lady.” She helped Lady Liang stand.

“Tell all the servants who know how to manage the account books about this,” Lady Liang directed, “so that they don’t help someone who shouldn’t be helped.”

Auntie Liu hurriedly agreed. “I’ll attend to it right away.”

***

In Lanfeng Pavilion, Lu Wancheng slept until noon as usual. Noticing that he looked unhappy, Hualu asked whether he felt unwell, but Lu Wancheng just rubbed his forehead and replied, “My head hurts.”

“You were fine before, so why does your head hurt now?” Hualu fretted.

“I probably didn’t get enough sleep,” Lu Wancheng guessed.

Hualu was aghast. “Do you know how long you slept…?”

Headaches and fevers were common for Lu Wancheng. Still, Hualu didn’t dare shrug off such a symptom. She went to the study to find Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu felt Lu Wancheng’s pulse, then felt his forehead. “You overslept.”

Lu Wancheng was shocked. “Impossible.”

“What’s so impossible about that? Do you think you’re an infant? You sleep sixteen hours a day—of course you have a headache.”

Lu Wancheng sighed. “What should I do, then?”

Lin Qingyu sat on the bed and massaged Lu Wancheng’s temples, applying just enough pressure. “If you’re clearheaded, don’t sleep too much. In the future, even if you want to stay awake, I’m afraid that…”

He stopped talking abruptly.

Lu Wancheng had lain his head on Lin Qingyu’s legs, detecting the faint scent of books when he did so, but suddenly he felt a little discomfited. He froze for a moment, telling himself that Lin Qingyu was also a man, before relaxing and closing his eyes to enjoy the peace of the moment.

But he only appreciated that peace briefly before Lin Qingyu callously stopped massaging his temples and got up, making Hualu take his place.

“That’s all?” Lu Wancheng quietly asked.

“I’m very busy.”

“Oh? What’re you busy with?”

“You have a great stepmother,” Lin Qingyu remarked pointedly.

After asking around a bit, Lu Wancheng found out what had happened between Lin Qingyu and Lady Liang that morning. He chuckled. “She was a little impatient, huh? Couldn’t even wait a few months… Fine.”

Hualu didn’t understand. “If the young lord starts managing the household, won’t our lives get better?”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “What are you talking about?”

***

That afternoon, Lin Qingyu stepped out of the study holding a pestle. Lanfeng Pavilion contained an elegant gazebo perfect for enjoying the spring scenery, but Lin Qingyu arrived too late. There was someone else on the platform already.

Lu Wancheng reclined in a rocking chair, rocking slowly and lazily in the sun. He was dressed in red, and his long hair was tied up, which added a bit of style to his appearance.

When he heard Lin Qingyu’s footsteps, he opened his eyes. “Physician Lin, why are you here? I thought you would stay in the study the whole day.”

“I’m going to grind some herbs.”

“Hmm? You’re not looking at the account books right now?”

“I’ll do it later.”

“You have to read medical books, formulate a treatment, *and* check the accounts? You want to do all of that?”

“So?”

“Isn’t it too much?”

“Well, I’m going to try it out.”

“Oh… What treatment are you making, Physician Lin?”

“A medicine that’s effective but can cause kidney deficiency.”[7]

“Huh?”

On a platform in a waterside pavilion among lush blossoms, one man basked in the sun while another ground herbs; both shared the limitless spring view.

When Lin Qingyu had finished preparing medicine for the day, it was already dark. He lit the lamp in the study and began to look through the account books. It was true that he’d never had a role in such affairs in the Lin household, but he’d always been with his mother when he was young. She had often looked through their account books, and he’d learned some things from just watching.

This type of accounting was performed by calculating turnover; it wasn’t hard to understand. But the accounts that Lady Liang had given him contained small, blurred handwriting—after only an hour, his eyes felt sore. Moreover, the dates had been messily recorded, the descriptions were vague, and content missing from one book would appear in another… Yet Lady Liang had asked him to finish it within three days.

Even so, he might be able to do it.

Deep into the night, the candlelight flickered. Huantong, initially seated at the table, ran to open the door when he heard noise. “Young Marquess? Why haven’t you gone to sleep yet?”

Lu Wancheng entered the study with Hualu supporting him. “The night is long, and I’m not sleepy. Your young master also said that I shouldn’t oversleep.”

“I said you should get up earlier, not stay up later,” Lin Qingyu corrected him, head buried in an account book. He hadn’t stopped to rest all day, and he couldn’t hide his exhaustion any longer.

Seeing his expression, Lu Wancheng felt his chest tighten. “It’s already midnight, so why don’t you finish up? Leave whatever problem you’re figuring out now for tomorrow, all right?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t even look up. “Actually, I’d like you to get a head start today on the problems I’ll go through tomorrow, Young Marquess.”

“Huh…?”

“Since the night is long, and you’re not sleepy, why don’t you pitch in…?”

Lu Wancheng choked and backed up, holding his forehead. “My head hurts again. I’ll go lie down some more. Yes…”

Lu Wancheng ran away so quickly that Huantong wondered whether his illness had been cured.

“The young marquess is no help,” he complained quietly, giving Lin Qingyu a fresh cup of tea.

Lin Qingyu was used to that. “He’s just a layabout. It’s better to burn incense and pray to the Buddha than to rely on him.”

But Lu Wancheng actually returned and approached Lin Qingyu quietly, staring at the account book open on the table with a solemn expression.

Lin Qingyu thought he was acting weird. “What?”

Lu Wancheng leaned over and blew out the lamp on the table. Lin Qingyu didn’t know what Lu Wancheng was doing. In the darkness, he felt something cold touch his wrist—someone was holding it.

“Go to bed,” Lu Wancheng said. “Leave the account books to me.”

Lin Qingyu pulled away. “To you? Didn’t you want to avoid working on them?”

Lu Wancheng had nothing to say to that.

“Besides,” Lin Qingyu added, “if Lady Liang finds out you helped, I’ll be accused of neglecting my husband. I want to do this well, because…”

“I know you want to take this opportunity to make her eat her words, but you needn’t be so hard on yourself. You dislike dealing with the inner chamber’s affairs, so why force yourself to do something you don’t like? Huantong, hide the fire starter—don’t let your young master relight the lamp.”

“Just take care of yourself, Young Marquess,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “You have no right to meddle in my business. Light the lamp, Huantong.”

Huantong didn’t dare disobey his young master, so he rekindled the lamp’s flame. Only then did the servant see that Lu Wancheng’s expression was no longer as

casual and carefree.

Lu Wancheng raised his eyebrows. "*Your* business?"

Lin Qingyu felt as though this Lu Wancheng was a complete stranger.

"Why is my stepmother's problem your business?" Lu Wancheng continued. "Shouldn't it be *my* business?"

"No need to bother yourself, Young Marquess. Just tend to your illness," Lin Qingyu insisted, his tone chilly.

Lu Wancheng was silent for just a moment before he laughed and went back to normal. "But I can't sleep if you aren't in the same room as me, Physician Lin."

"Then stay up all night," Lin Qingyu said, not feeling sorry for him at all. "You won't die from doing that now and then."

Lu Wancheng was speechless.

Afterward, neither of them slept well. Lin Qingyu slumbered during the latter half of the night and woke early in the morning to attend to the account books again.

"Young Master?" Huantong's voice came from outside. "An uncle wants to see you. He says the young marquess sent him."

What was Lu Wancheng doing now? Lin Qingyu frowned. "Let him in."

Soon a middle-aged man with a dignified appearance entered and greeted him. "Good morning, Young Lord. I am an accountant in the duke of Wen's household. My name is Zhang—Zhang Shiquan."

Lin Qingyu was a bit startled, but he understood most of what had happened. "The young marquess asked you to come, because…"

"The young marquess sent a letter to the duke last night, mentioning that you had some difficult accounts to take care of and were overwhelmed. The duke carefully selected someone to come, and he chose me," Zhang Shiquan said, his voice respectful. "Don't worry, Young Lord. I've worked on accounts since I was a child, so however difficult it is, I can finish it in no time."

Lin Qingyu came to his senses and handed an account book to Zhang Shiquan. "Steward Zhang, please take a look."

Zhang Shiquan flipped through a few pages. "This account book has clearly been tampered with. If you trust me, Young Lord, give me a day to work alone. Your complexion isn't healthy, so please go rest."

Every profession had its specialists. If Zhang Shiquan could achieve Lin Qingyu's goal, Lin Qingyu didn't want to waste any more time on those accounts.

Leaving the study, Lin Qingyu stopped a maid and asked, "Where is the young marquess?"

"He went to the garden after his meal."

Lin Qingyu arrived at the garden to see Lu Wancheng playing pitch-pot with several maids. Huantong bet half of his monthly salary and lost it all, wailing brokenheartedly. Lu Wancheng's smile nearly split his face; he looked exactly like a wealthy man's lazy son, one with no real skills.

Studying him for a long time, Lin Qingyu suddenly felt…that he truly understood Lu Wancheng.

Chapter 10

AN ACCOUNTANT the duke of Wen chose for his own grandson would, of course, be skilled. Zhang Shiquan was experienced and meticulous, and he really did take only one day to finish with the account books.

"I've organized the books," Zhang Shiquan said when he was finally done. "If you're worried, Young Marquess and Young Lord, you may look them over. Not to boast, but I've been calculating accounts for thirty years and have never made a mistake."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Thank you."

"You're amazing, Steward Zhang." Lu Wancheng lifted his gaze to signal Hualu, who stepped forward to give Zhang Shiquan a reward prepared ahead of time —a heavy bag of silver. "There will likely be more to this issue," Lu Wancheng added, "so please remain in the marquess of Nan'an's residence for now."

Zhang Shiquan bowed. "I will follow your orders, Young Marquess."

As soon as Zhang Shiquan left the room, the straight-backed Lu Wancheng immediately slumped. He lay across the table, staring at Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu flipped through the finished account book. "Just say what you want to," he told Lu Wancheng lightly.

"When I told you to leave the accounts to me, you didn't believe me."

Lu Wancheng sounded slightly accusatory, but such a trick wouldn't work on Lin Qingyu. "And indeed, *you* didn't deal with the accounts. You found someone else to."

"What's the difference?"

"You can't rely on others for everything."

"Why not? I gave him silver for his services, so it was win-win."

"In the future, when you're too lazy to eat, sleep, or get married and have children, will you have others do those things for you too?"

"Have children?" Lu Wancheng pretended to be deep in thought. "Well… If I didn't have to put the work in, it *would* be great."

For a moment, Lin Qingyu didn't know what Lu Wancheng was talking about. When he understood, he rose suddenly to his feet. "That's not what I meant!"

Lu Wancheng laughed. "Then what'd you mean?"

Lin Qingyu had just wanted to say that some things needed to be done in person. Only a pervert would make it about *that* kind of thing.

He looked down at the pervert sitting by the table, then a moment later said, "You're hopeless."

***

Soon, the day dawned when Lady Liang would check the accounts.

Lady Liang got up extremely early, applying her makeup in front of the mirror. Meanwhile, behind her, Auntie Liu styled her hair.

Lady Liang cried out in pain as Auntie Liu pulled her scalp. “What’s wrong with you? You’ve forgotten how to do hair after a month of hard work in the garden?”

“Please forgive me, Lady,” Auntie Liu pleaded, lowering her head and bowing. As she wiped away her tears, she assessed Lady Liang’s expression out of the corner of her eye. “To be frank, Lady, I’m almost sixty. How could I bear such hardship? I held a broom for a month; I’m afraid that I’ll dirty your jade comb if I grasp it.”

Lady Liang held her temples. “You’re my confidant, and arranging to punish you meant that he didn’t respect you. You’ve been wronged. Today…” Her lips curled into a smile. “Just wait.”

Lu Niantao arrived early in the morning to greet Lady Liang, then stayed to keep her company. But even after their tea went cold, Lin Qingyu was nowhere to be seen.

Auntie Liu craned her neck to look outside. “Is the young lord feeling guilty? He hasn’t even come for the morning greeting. This is unacceptable. I expected no more of a male wife from a small family—he really has no grasp of basic etiquette.”

“Auntie Liu, be careful with your words,” Lu Niantao said calmly. “Let’s wait a little longer. If he still doesn’t show up, we’ll send someone to ask after him.”

Just then, an announcement came from outside: “The young marquess and young lord are here.”

Lu Niantao was surprised. “My brother’s here too?”

Auntie Liu smirked. “He must be here to support the young lord.”

For some reason, Lady Liang felt uneasy. In the past, Lu Wancheng had just been an invalid that she could coax and wheedle into a marriage on the grounds that it would ward off his illness—a marriage to a male wife, of course, so Lu Wancheng couldn’t leave any children behind. Then all she’d needed to do was wait for Lu Wancheng to die. But ever since Lin Qingyu had married into the family, the invalid had gotten gradually healthier. He could even get out of bed, and his personality had changed greatly. His recovery must have stemmed from the medicine Lin Qingyu prescribed.

The last time Lu Wancheng had “reminded” her of their situation, slyly bringing up his birth mother, Lady Liang was so irked that she had slept poorly for a couple of nights. In the past, Lu Wancheng had done whatever she said; who would’ve expected Lu Wancheng to protect his male wife, a man who couldn’t even give birth to his children?

Lady Liang couldn’t remember ever having seen a warding-off marriage actually heal a patient. She didn’t believe such weddings worked, but she was afraid that Lu Wancheng would leave behind a child even though he was dying. Thus, she went around everywhere asking for a male wife, making herself look like a deeply affectionate mother in front of the marquess; she was killing two birds with one stone. If she’d known that this would be the result, however, she would’ve made up her mind to have Lu Wancheng die earlier.

Noticing Lady Liang’s face darken, Lu Niantao called out, “Mother?”

Lady Liang's brow was tightly furrowed. "I may not be able to deal with Lu Wancheng now."

Lu Niantao smiled. "Please don't worry, Mother. Father is a reasonable man. As long as rationality is on your side, there's nothing to fear."

Auntie Liu clapped. "Young Lady is correct. You were kind enough to guide the young lord, yet he is inept and lacks the skill to handle the account books. How could he justify himself?!"

Lady Liang steadied herself. "You're right. There's nothing for me to fear."

During that conversation, Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng in.

Lady Liang smiled. "You're here."

Lu Niantao rose and greeted them. "Brother. Sister-in-Law."

Lin Qingyu simply nodded, while Lu Wancheng seemed to suppress anger. "Mm."

Lady Liang and Lu Niantao looked at each other, unsure why Lu Wancheng was upset. Only Lin Qingyu knew that Lu Wancheng was agitated because he'd needed to get up earlier than he might have liked; he always acted like he was being wronged when someone else woke him in the morning.

Auntie Liu didn't notice. "You're finally here, Young Lord," she said scornfully. "My lady has waited a long time for you."

Lu Wancheng looked up. "He's late because I wouldn't get out of bed," he remarked casually. "Is something wrong with that?"

Under Lu Wancheng's gaze, Auntie Liu shrank back as though she were being bullied. "I dare not claim that."

"Brother, can't you walk?" Lu Niantao asked worriedly. "Why are you in a wheelchair again?"

"He's sleepy and doesn't want to walk," Lin Qingyu calmly replied.

"Lanfeng Pavilion is too far from here," Lu Wancheng protested.

He was just lazy.

Lin Qingyu didn't want to waste any more time on Lady Liang or the others. Before she could speak, he cut straight to the point. "Huantong."

Huantong handed the account books to Lady Liang. "My young master organized the books," he said. "Please take a look, Lady."

Lady Liang didn't let it show on her face, but she was suspicious. The manservant was so confident; had Lin Qingyu really finished a month's worth of accounts in three days? The servants in Lanfeng Pavilion had certainly told her that Lin Qingyu was reading books and preparing medicine as usual, so where had he found the time to organize the account books?

Auntie Liu had the same question. "We'll know after you look through it, Lady," she whispered.

Lady Liang opened an account book, and with every page she saw, she felt more miserable. After looking through half of the book, she was in complete shock, but she still forced a smile onto her face. "This is well organized and thorough—as I expected of you, Qingyu."

“You’re too kind, Lady.”

Auntie Liu’s expression changed, and she almost blurted out, “How is that possible?” Fortunately, Lady Liang’s glance stopped her. Instead, Auntie Liu said, “Why don’t you take a closer look, Lady?”

Lady Liang was skilled at accounting—she’d overseen the household for twenty years, and she could tell at a glance that the couple had come prepared. Simply put, the organized, tidy accounts were better than what the marquess’s personal accountant could put together.

For a while, Lu Niantao was deep in thought. Then she piped up, “Oh! I heard a few days ago that there was an extra servant in Lanfeng Pavilion?”

Lady Liang understood her daughter’s implication. Nobody in Lanfeng Pavilion knew how to organize the account books, so the young couple must’ve found someone to help.

“My grandfather sent someone to ask after me,” Lu Wancheng said. “Is something wrong with that?”

Lu Niantao smiled. “You misunderstand, Brother. I was just mentioning it. And Sister-in-Law did such a perfect job with the account books, even though it was his first time—Mother, you can feel confident handing household affairs over to him in the future.”

“Yes, doing that makes sense,” Lu Wancheng said, smiling mysteriously. “Mother can enjoy a life of leisure after transferring her household duties.”

“Brother, Sister-in-Law, you’re both so filial,” Lu Niantao continued. “Speaking of which, doesn’t Sister-in-Law have a perfect memory? He’s probably memorized everything in the accounts, hasn’t he?”

Lady Liang looked at her daughter, satisfied. “Oh? In that case, I’ll test Qingyu.”

Lu Wancheng raised his eyebrows. He was about to get up, but Lin Qingyu restrained him, holding his shoulders. “Qingyu?”

“Let her test me,” Lin Qingyu said.

Lady Liang opened the book. “How many businesses does the household own in the capital?”

“Twenty-six. Among them three private banks, three restaurants, two teahouses, two silk shops, two porcelain shops…”

“Which farm had the best harvest last month?”

“Shuyang Farm, twenty li[8] away from the capital.”

Lady Liang’s tone grew impatient. “In Xu Prefecture, the marquess’s household…”

“Has five silk and cloth shops total, and the loss last month was thirteen hundred taels,” Lin Qingyu said, nonchalant. “If I remember correctly, Xu is your ancestral home, Lady.”

Lady Liang slowly set down the account book and forced a smile. “Yes. That’s all correct.”

Realizing that Auntie Liu would have nothing to babble about for a long time, Huantong wanted to shoot the young marquess a cheerful look. The young master

could recite information on obscure medical techniques after reading it just once, so recalling a simple account book was nothing.

However, the young marquess didn't look at Huantong. Instead, he stared quietly at his young master, a smile and a glimmer of pride in his eyes.

"Do you have any other questions, Lady?" asked Lin Qingyu.

"N-no."

"You can go back first," Lu Wancheng told him. "I have more to discuss with Mother."

Lin Qingyu glanced at Lady Liang, then lowered his gaze and left with Huantong.

Lu Niantao rose as well. Smiling, she said, "I'll see my sister-in-law out."

Only Lu Wancheng and Lady Liang were now left in the hall, aside from the servants. Lady Liang picked up her teacup to hide her unease. "What else do you have to say to me, Wancheng?"

Lu Wancheng lifted his hand. "I want to stand and speak with you. Could you help me up, Mother?"

She froze. "Why wouldn't I? You grew up in my arms."

Lady Liang stepped forward and helped him up. They stood facing each other. Lady Liang only stood as tall as Lu Wancheng's shoulders, which made her feel small.

"Don't worry about me, Mother," Lu Wancheng said slowly. "My illness is terminal. If the legendary physician Hua Tuo were alive, even he would be useless to me. Qingyu isn't reading medical books, nor preparing medicine, for my sake—and even if he is, he can't save me."

Lady Liang's gaze shifted. "What are you talking about, child?"

One corner of Lu Wancheng's lips seemed to hold a small smile. "I don't have much time left—probably not even half a year. I just want to eat, drink, and stare at beauties." He walked slowly toward Lady Liang. "Is that all right, Mother?"

Lady Liang was forced to back away until she had nowhere else to go. She sat down heavily, her nails turning white as she gripped one corner of the table. Her voice trembled. "I…"

"Young Marquess, what are you doing?!" Auntie Liu stepped up, trying to stop him. "The lady is the family's matriarch. How can you be so insubordinate?!"

Lu Wancheng gazed back at her with hostility. "Did I allow you to speak?"

Auntie Liu's legs went weak. She froze on the spot and dared not breathe; it was almost as if she were being strangled. The other servants stood to the side, and no one else dared step forward to help Lady Liang.

The hall was deathly silent.

After a long time, Lu Wancheng turned back to Lady Liang and smiled. "You still haven't answered me, Mother."

Lady Liang's face twisted in panic. Her voice was hoarse as she croaked out, "Y-yes, that's fine."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "Thank you, Mother."

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Shortly after Lin Qingyu returned to Lanfeng Pavilion, Lu Wancheng arrived as well. He looked exhausted, coughing continually. Ever since the weather had warmed, Lu Wancheng's cough had improved a lot; why was it bothering him again now?

Lu Wancheng himself didn't care. "Maybe I was a little too showy earlier."

"What did you say to Lady Liang?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"Nothing much. I just want her to behave a little."

Lin Qingyu didn't press him further for answers. "Give me your wrist. Let me feel your pulse."

Lu Wancheng put his wrist out. "Physician Lin…" he yawned.

"What?"

He used his other hand to rub his eyes. "I'm sleeeeepy."

Lin Qingyu was practically speechless. "How old are you, to be speaking like a child? That's so embarrassing."

"Fine, then," Lu Wancheng said, his tone changing. "The spring breeze is warm, and sleep is overtaking me. I should like to lie in bed and take a nap."

Chapter 11

WHEN HE HEARD LU WANCHENG coughing, Lin Qingyu knew that something was wrong. Predictably, after a night passed, Lu Wancheng had developed a high fever.

The servants in Lanfeng Pavilion were used to this by now—Lu Wancheng's illness went through ups and downs. When he was feeling better, he could get out of bed and walk. On the other hand, when he was poorly, he could sink into a deep sleep for over half a month, his senses groggy even when he woke up—just like the month of their wedding.

Lu Wancheng's health had improved during the warding-off marriage, but his root disease was still there, and sickness could hit him like a landslide. The next morning, he fell into a sleep he couldn't be woken from, his handsome face abnormally red from fever.

Hualu put a cold towel on Lu Wancheng's forehead. "Young Lord, will the young master be all right?" she asked anxiously.

Lin Qingyu felt Lu Wancheng's pulse, then placed the patient's hand under the quilt. "It's just a cold."

Hualu sighed in relief. "Then the young master will be better after the fever passes?"

Lin Qingyu stayed silent. For a healthy, normal person, a cold didn't even require medicine; most people recovered within a couple of days. But years of disease had virtually hollowed Lu Wancheng's body. Even a slight cold could kill him if he wasn't careful.

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Fengqin soon brought Physician Zhang to Lanfeng Pavilion. Physician Zhang had a disciple with him this time; it was Tan Qizhi, whom Lin Qingyu had seen at the Lin residence before.

Tan Qizhi bowed to Lin Qingyu and smiled. "It's been a long time, Qingyu-xiong. Have you been well?"

Lin Qingyu looked at Physician Zhang.

"Qizhi just became my student," Physician Zhang explained. "When he heard the young marquess was ill, he was worried and insisted on coming to the manor to see him."

"Worried?" Lin Qingyu smiled. "Tan-xiong, are you and the young marquess familiar with each other?"

Shameless, Tan Qizhi replied, "The day we met in the Lin residence, the young marquess and I really hit it o—"

Lin Qingyu interrupted him. "The young marquess is weak and sick, so it's better that outsiders not cause confusion. Hualu, take Physician Zhang inside. Tan-

xiong, just stand here and wait."

Fengqin hesitated. "Young Lord, you're saying the guest should…stand?"

"What guest?" Lin Qingyu retorted.

For Tan Qizhi, standing at the door at noon with the sun shining down on him and passing servants staring at him would be simply humiliating.

Physician Zhang glanced at Tan Qizhi, helpless, then followed Hualu into Lu Wancheng's room.

Tan Qizhi clenched his teeth. "Lin Qingyu, you're crossing the line!" he said in a low voice.

Lin Qingyu found it amusing. "Could I bully you if you didn't serve yourself up on a platter for it?"

Tan Qizhi glared at him, his eyes full of venom.

Lin Qingyu didn't believe that he'd ever provoked Tan Qizhi, so he didn't understand where Tan Qizhi's hatred for him came from. Perhaps it was just the way of the world—there were unexplained joys, so there would obviously be unexplained evils. Just as Lu Wancheng said, it would lower him to take Tan Qizhi seriously.

Tan Qizhi stepped closer. "There are only a hundred days until the Imperial Academy of Medicine's entrance examination. But if Lu Wancheng doesn't die, you can only stay in the manor to care for him, serve him, give him medicine, and wipe his body—like a good wife." Noticing Lin Qingyu's slightly stiff expression, Tan Qizhi cracked a smile. "So what if you're a genius and always above me? In the end, you're only…"

"I see," Lin Qingyu said, suddenly realizing something—Tan Qizhi's hostility to him was simply because of jealousy.

Tan Qizhi's gaze darkened. "Why are you smiling?!"

Lin Qingyu's mouth twitched a bit. Almost sympathetically, he said, "You're so pitiful." After that, he didn't bother to look at Tan Qizhi.

Physician Zhang had taken care of Lu Wancheng's condition for years now; he was familiar with it. Lin Qingyu watched him check Lu Wancheng's pulse and reach the same conclusion—that he had a cold.

Physician Zhang prescribed some medicine, left some instructions, and hurriedly departed.

His prescription was for nothing more than a common, inconsequential cold medicine. But Lu Wancheng's body differed from a healthy person's; if the typical prescription was altered slightly, it might be twice as effective.

Hualu was waiting for Lin Qingyu to give her the prescription he held so that she could collect the required herbs and make the medicine it named. "Young Lord, is something wrong with the prescription?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment, then handed it to her. "No. Go ahead."

With Lu Wancheng ill, Lanfeng Pavilion became busy. The servants were responsible for making and administering his medicine, so Lin Qingyu didn't have to do much. He read books and prepared medicine in the study as usual, but the courtyard was so quiet that he felt uneasy. The laughingthrush and myna had both shut up. Were they worried for their master too?

What was the point of worrying, though? Even if Lu Wancheng survived this time, there would certainly come a time when he didn't. Only those who hadn't made proper mental preparations would find it strange when someone close to death perished.

The special medicine Lin Qingyu was preparing was almost ready; the next step would be to boil and simmer the concoction, then make it into pills that could be easily carried and stored. This was the first time he'd produced a pill that was so tricky to make, so he wanted to do everything himself.

Lin Qingyu headed to the apothecary dedicated to making Lu Wancheng's medications. There, several maids were working inside. Though busy, they didn't forget to gossip about the rumors in the manor.

"The lady used to be the first person to come when the young master fell ill. She even personally made his medicine. What happened this time? She still hasn't visited."

"I heard from a servant in the lady's courtyard that she and the young master quarreled. After his scolding, she couldn't even stand."

"Did you mishear? Wouldn't it be the young master who couldn't stand? Besides, the lady and young master are such a loving mother and son—why would they quarrel?"

"Over the young lord, of course. A mother-in-law and daughter-in-law's relationship is a never-ending problem. My sister-in-law and mother argue every couple of days, which worries my brother to no end…"

Lin Qingyu pushed open the apothecary door, and the gossip inside abruptly stopped. Only the bubbling sound of boiling medicine could be heard. He ignored the maids' fearful expressions and walked straight to the stove, acting as if he hadn't heard anything.

When he returned, Lin Qingyu called Huantong over. "Go to Lady Liang's courtyard and get this month's account book," he ordered.

Huantong didn't understand. "Young Master, why do you want an account book?"

"To help her out."

When news of Lu Wancheng's illness reached Lady Liang, her chest—which had felt heavy for days—finally lightened.

"This is karma, Lady," Auntie Liu gloated. "Not even the heavens could bear to see the young master treat you like that—they had to punish such an unfilial son!"

But as Lady Liang recalled the events of that day, some fear still lingered. "Forget it. Lin Qingyu can't save him, so let him be."

Just then, a maid reported that Huantong had arrived from Lanfeng Pavilion.

"Qingyu's personal servant?" Lady Liang grimaced. "Why is he here?"

"To collect this month's account book. The young lord said that he wanted to give you a hand, Lady."

When Lady Liang heard that, her chest heaved. "He really said that?"

"Did you hear that, Lady?" Auntie Liu gnashed her teeth in anger. "You can't just shrug this off now. He's clearly trying to take power from you—you mustn't just

sit and wait for death!"

Annoyed, Lady Liang retorted, "What can I do?! I did say that I wanted him to take over household duties. How was I to know he'd actually be capable?!"

Auntie Liu's eyes darted. She waved the servants away, then whispered into Lady Liang's ear. "Let's do this…" she began.

"No," Lady Liang replied. "Lu Wancheng already warned me. If he found out, I'm afraid he'd…"

"The young marquess is ill now, and it's hard to say whether he'll survive. Did you forget what Second Young Lady said? So long as you have reason on your side, the marquess will believe you. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Observing that Lady Liang was still uncertain, Auntie Liu continued, "Think about Second Young Lady and Third Young Master. Do you really want a widow to run the marquess's household?"

"Niantao… Qiaosong…" Lady Liang chanted their names inaudibly, then steadied herself. "Take the account book to Lanfeng Pavilion, Auntie Liu."

A smile split Auntie Liu's face. "Right away, Lady."

After Lin Qingyu received the book, he summoned Zhang Shiquan, asking him to take a closer look to see whether anything was off. When Zhang Shiquan finished looking at it, he remarked, "I'm hesitant to draw a conclusion based on just two months of accounts. I should be able to figure out more with three or four months' worth."

Lin Qingyu asked Huantong to send this month's account book back and request the books from the previous months.

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On the third day of Lu Wancheng's comatose slumber, his fever finally receded. Still, he didn't wake up yet. The health he'd regained was completely spent now; Lu Wancheng lay quietly on the bed, eyes closed and body feeble, like a flame faltering in the wind. It made everyone—well, Hualu and the others—worried.

Hualu tried to get Lu Wancheng to drink some medicine. Lu Wancheng's brow furrowed; he seemed to hate the medicine's bitterness even in his sleep, actually spitting some out. Hualu hurriedly grabbed a handkerchief to wipe his mouth, but Lin Qingyu took the medicine bowl from her hands.

"I'll do it," he said.

He filled a spoon with medicine, then blew on it. Before it even got close to Lu Wancheng's mouth, however, he heard Fengqin from outside: "Young Lord, the lady is summoning you."

Lin Qingyu paused, then returned the bowl to Hualu. "Keep feeding it to him."

When he arrived at the front hall, Lady Liang sat in the place of honor while Auntie Liu sat at her side. An unfamiliar middle-aged man also stood in the hall, looking worried.

"Is Wancheng's illness any better?" Lady Liang asked, pretending to be concerned.

“Lady, if you have something to say, get to the point.”

That chagrined Lady Liang a bit. “This is the household accountant, Steward Wang.”

Steward Wang bowed. “Greetings, Young Lord.”

“Steward Wang found that a page was missing from the account book brought back from Lanfeng Pavilion.” Lady Liang paused, then continued, “That page was the most important one. It recorded the revenue and expenses of our restaurants in the capital.”

Steward Wang appeared to choke up. “How could such an important page go missing from the book?!” he cried out. “Even death isn’t punishment enough for me!”

He’s earsplitting, Lin Qingyu thought. These people just wouldn’t let up. Instead of dealing with them, Lin Qingyu mused, why not just dose them with something that would make them behave? “I urge you to rethink this,” he told the steward.

“Rethink what?” Steward Wang asked, confused.

“Dying as punishment,” Lin Qingyu scoffed. “But of course, if you want to die, I won’t stop you.”

Steward Wang was speechless. It had just been a figure of speech—how could he actually die over a single page in an account book? He looked toward Lady Liang and Auntie Liu for help.

“Steward Wang, don’t say that,” Auntie Liu soothed him. “It doesn’t have anything to do with you. The book was complete when you brought it to us; the lady can attest to that. But when Huantong sent it back, a page was missing.”

Lin Qingyu silently watched them act.

Under his gaze, Lady Liang was uneasy, but she smiled and said, “Qingyu, it’s normal to make mistakes; you only just started managing the household. Just pay attention next time. That said, the missing page must be found, or the accounts will be in disarray. Why not go back to Lanfeng Pavilion and look for it?”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “All right.”

Returning to Lanfeng Pavilion, Lin Qingyu heard joyous laughter from outside Lu Wancheng’s room. He breathed a sigh of relief and smiled icily. As soon as Lu Wancheng woke up, he’d started joking around with the maids. In some respects, he was quite hardy.

When Lin Qingyu entered the room, he met Lu Wancheng’s gaze; it was as if his husband had been watching the door.

Lu Wancheng coughed, his voice hoarse. “You’re back?”

“Mm-hmm. How are you feeling?”

“I felt like I got sick, and came alive again. Then got sick *again*, then came alive *again*…”

Lin Qingyu’s face turned expressionless. “If you have this much energy now, then take some medicine on your own. Don’t make others feed you constantly.”

“I didn’t ask *you* to feed me,” Lu Wancheng teased. “So why are you angry?”

“I…” Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes and tried to calm down. He’d run into too many stupid people recently, and his temper was hard to control. “I didn’t mean to be angry. I reacted out of habit. I’m sorry.”

Lu Wancheng didn’t mind being scolded by the ill-tempered beauty. He smiled jokingly. “Were you disappointed that I failed in dying, Physician Lin?”

“A little,” Lin Qingyu retorted lightheartedly.

Lu Wancheng laughed; in his sickness, his eyes were the only bright feature on his face. “Sorry. It was an accident.”

Chapter 12

LIN QINGYU DIDN'T KNOW exactly why Lu Wancheng had apologized to him.

Because he hadn't died? Hadn't been able to pass away before the Imperial Academy of Medicine's entrance exam?

There were still more than three months until the exam. If Lu Wancheng died during that period, Lin Qingyu would still have a chance to sit the exam. In fact, Lin Qingyu should've been hoping that Lu Wancheng would die earlier, as he had when they'd just gotten married. But since Lu Wancheng hadn't known anything about the planned warding-off marriage, Lin Qingyu could forgive him, and he wouldn't harm someone innocent—he just had to be patient and wait for Lu Wancheng's death.

But what had Lin Qingyu been doing recently? He'd received that prescription from his father, then worked tirelessly to fine-tune and prepare it in order to make medicine. It was true that he'd done that out of curiosity, but had he really *never* thought of saving Lu Wancheng?

In truth, providing that medicine couldn't even be called "saving" him. It would only allow Lu Wancheng to survive another six months at most. Since Lu Wancheng didn't care for life or death, what difference would that make to him?

"If you really want to die, then…" Lin Qingyu swallowed, stopping there.

Lu Wancheng seemed to guess what he was going to say. "No, Physician Lin," he said half-heartedly. "Committing suicide would mean I went to hell. Not only would I not reincarnate, I'd be enslaved by ghosts and forced to do hard labor every day. You know me—I'm not afraid of death, but I *am* afraid of being tired."

Lu Wancheng's nonsense calmed Lin Qingyu down a bit somehow. "Nonsense."

Though Lu Wancheng had awoken, he was still extremely weak. After he'd spoken just a few sentences, his face was already turning pale. If he consumed anything solid, he threw it up, so he lived off liquids, not even touching meat.

On Lu Wancheng's orders, Huantong had bought a number of novellas from the bookstore on Yongxing Street. When Lu Wancheng was awake, he would half prop himself up on a soft pillow to read. Going to bed, he would force Lin Qingyu to listen to his "storytelling" until he fell asleep.

Later that day, Lu Wancheng was reading a novella when he spotted Lanfeng Pavilion's servants rummaging through everything. "What are they doing?" he asked.

Lin Qingyu answered, "Looking for something."

"I obviously know that they're looking for something—I'm not blind. *What* are they looking for?"

"A 'missing' page from an account book," Lin Qingyu replied.

Those recovering from illness were supposed to avoid stress, so Lin Qingyu hadn't wanted to tell Lu Wancheng about the account book at first. But, when he thought about it, why would Lu Wancheng worry over such a trivial thing when he didn't even care about his death? He recounted the day's events.

Lu Wancheng's reaction was bigger than he expected. His eyes even glinted with delight as he said, "She can't blame others for defending and counterattacking—she's making trouble for herself. This is a great opportunity for you to fight for that inheritance, Physician Lin."

As soon as he heard that, Lin Qingyu knew that Lu Wancheng had come up with the same idea as he had. "I know. Why else do you think I asked them to look for that nonexistent missing page?"

Lu Wancheng feigned a sigh. "Hey, since we get along so well, why don't we…become sworn brothers?"

Lin Qingyu was almost speechless. "No."

Lu Wancheng coughed, shocked. "Why not?!"

"I already married you. I don't want to become sworn brothers too," Lin Qingyu coldly replied. "And I don't think we get along *that* well."

That was quite the blow for Lu Wancheng. "Why is it so hard to get you to say 'Wancheng-gege'?" he mumbled.

"Do you think I can't hear you?"

The servants left no stone unturned in Lanfeng Pavilion, but they didn't find the missing page. When Lin Qingyu told Lady Liang that, Steward Wang looked as if the sky had fallen. "What am I to do?! The account books are confidential, and the accounting office only has one copy of each. If something ends up happening because we don't have that page…"

Lady Liang frowned as well. "Are you sure you searched everywhere in Lanfeng Pavilion?" she pressed Lin Qingyu. "Did the servants search carelessly?"

"We looked everywhere. It's not in Lanfeng Pavilion."

Auntie Liu finally raised her eyebrows and sighed. "Young Lord, you betrayed the lady's trust by losing such an important page. Furthermore, according to the manor's rules, you must now go to the ancestral hall and reflect on yourself in seclusion!"

Lin Qingyu continued to address Lady Liang, asking, "Why are you certain that the page was lost in Lanfeng Pavilion, Lady?"

Auntie Liu interrupted. "When the account book was sent to Lanfeng Pavilion, everything was in there, but that page was missing when the book was brought back! So where else could it have gone astray?"

Lady Liang thought Lin Qingyu would put up more of a fight, but he just nodded. "I understand."

He gave up so quickly that Lady Liang didn't react for a moment. "You're…"

"If that's the case," Lin Qingyu said slowly, "I was negligent. Please forgive me, Lady."

Everyone exchanged looks, and after they collected themselves, they were ready to make more trouble.

Lady Liang pressed her lips together, feeling that something was amiss. "You tried your best to find it, Qingyu. And if it can't be found, there's nothing we can do." She was acting like a kind, generous marchioness.

"Lady, should we tell the marquess about this?" Auntie Liu asked.

Lin Qingyu lifted his gaze slightly. A page from an account book getting lost constituted a big event in the inner chambers, but it would be far from important to the marquess. The marquess of Nan'an had served the current emperor even before his ascent to the throne; moreover, his first wife was the empress's sister. Thus, the marquess could be considered the head of all the court officials. He rarely asked about the harem's affairs, and Lin Qingyu had only seen him a few times since marrying into the household. Only things that Lady Liang couldn't control ought to be brought to the marquess's attention.

A single oversight on the young lord's part wasn't at all significant. If Lady Liang mentioned it to the marquess, he'd only think that she was making a mountain out of a molehill and wouldn't pay it much attention. But if Lin Qingyu *kept* making mistakes, and Lady Liang brought them up in front of the marquess, the person making those errors would be the source of his displeasure.

Lady Liang paid it some thought. "The marquess has much to do at court. He shouldn't worry about the manor's affairs."

Steward Wang shook his head and sighed. "But the young lord is taking care of household affairs for the first time. How concerning."

To prevent Steward Wang from embarrassing Lin Qingyu, Lady Liang "kindly" interrupted him. "Though Qingyu is a man, he is still the eldest daughter-in-law of the marquess's household. Who would share my burden if not him? Let's just leave it at that. If he creates any more trouble in the future, I'll take responsibility for him."

Lin Qingyu lowered his gaze. "Thank you, Lady."

Sighing, Lady Liang had a maid present him with another stack of account books. "These are the manor's winter books. Take them back and organize them, Qingyu. You mustn't lose anything this time."

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Lin Qingyu told Zhang Shiquan to take good care of the account books, and Zhang Shiquan didn't dare neglect them. If he was around, then the account books were out—but if he wasn't around, he locked the books in a cabinet. When it was time for Lin Qingyu to report to Lady Liang, Zhang Shiquan even counted the books' pages carefully—ensuring that nothing was missing—before handing them to Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu brought the books to the front hall to meet with Lady Liang. There, she ordered that tea be served, then asked Lin Qingyu to wait as she flipped through the books in front of him.

"Strange. Why don't I see last year's charcoal records? Steward Wang, did you miss that section while you were recording things?"

"No, I recorded it," Steward Wang said hurriedly. "It should be on page twenty-six."

Lin Qingyu voiced agreement. "There is such a page. I've seen it."

"Twenty-four, twenty-five…twenty-seven?" Lady Liang widened her eyes as she went through the pages. "Why is…another page missing?"

Lin Qingyu frowned. "That's impossible."

“It’s not there,” Lady Liang reconfirmed.

“Please look again, Lady.”

Lady Liang’s face darkened. She threw the account book at Auntie Liu—but anyone could tell that she wanted to hurl it at Lin Qingyu instead.

She no longer came off as kind and generous as usual. “Since you don’t believe me…” she said coldly. “Auntie Liu, help the young lord count.”

Auntie Liu flipped quickly through the account book. “There’s no twenty-sixth page. Steward Wang, how many pages does a single account book hold?”

“A hundred and twenty,” he replied.

Auntie Liu counted the pages from cover to cover. “This one only contains a hundred and nineteen. Why would another page go missing?!”

Lin Qingyu’s always-cold expression finally conveyed some of the uneasiness that the others wanted to see. “Another page? How could that be possible? Lady, it wasn’t lost in Lanfeng Pavilion.”

“You’re claiming that again?” Lady Liang asked. “Qingyu, I can protect you once, but not every time.”

At that point, Lin Qingyu stayed quiet, his eyes half closed.

Lady Liang’s lips curved into a small smile, and Auntie Liu couldn’t suppress her smirk.

Steward Wang was as nervous as last time, though. “Lady, please give this some more thought, for the household’s sake! Lady!”

Lady Liang rubbed her temples. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have had high hopes for you,” she told Lin Qingyu. “Wancheng is so ill; you should stay by his side and care for him instead.”

Lin Qingyu finally bowed his head to the others. “The young marquess has his own servants to take care of him. I would still like to manage the household affairs. I hope you…will give me another chance, Lady.”

Something flashed in Lady Liang’s eyes. She was right—Lin Qingyu was aiming for the manor’s inheritance. Who knew that such a beautiful man who looked so coolheaded and reserved was so greedy and sinister? If he actually gained the power to manage the household at some point, what would happen?

Lady Liang mulled that over for a long time. Then, as if making a compromise, she said, “You shouldn’t involve yourself in keeping the account books anymore. But how about this? The crown prince’s mother, Noble Consort Chen, is about to turn forty years old. You can take care of her birthday gift.”

Gift-giving between officials was very particular—it required one to consider both courtesy and reciprocity, as well as the social connections of those involved. The gifts the marquess’s household received were all recorded; those records extended to who had given the gift and what it included. The gifts prepared in return had to suit the formal positions of, and relationships between, the marquess of Nan’an and the other official. If anything was off, that could lead to rumormongering. That was true even when giving a gift to an ordinary official, to say nothing of gift-giving to the heir apparent’s mother.

Lady Liang had the groundwork laid out. It was finally time to enact her larger scheme.

Lin Qingyu hesitated, then said, “I’ve never been in contact with the Eastern Palace, and I don’t know what Noble Consort Chen is fond of.”

“I have a book with records of all the gifts His Highness the Crown Prince and Noble Consort Chen have given the marquess over the years. You may refer to it to prepare the gift,” Lady Liang said. “Remember, His Majesty doesn’t like his concubines to be too extravagant, nor does he want the crown prince to be friends with powerful officials. The gift you prepare for Noble Consort Chen should simply be of equal value to the gifts they’ve given us.”

“All right,” Lin Qingyu agreed.

In Lanfeng Pavilion, Lu Wancheng slowly fed himself medicine—so slowly that drinking half of it took quite some time, which made Huantong so antsy that *he* wanted to quaff it instead.

When he heard “The young lord is back!” Lu Wancheng looked toward the door to watch Lin Qingyu come in, finishing the rest of his medicine in one gulp.

Huantong was confused. “Why did you start drinking the medicine so eagerly when you saw the young master?”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “I didn’t want the physician to scold me.”

Lin Qingyu ignored him. “Huantong, have Steward Zhang come over.”

When he heard that another page from an account book had gone missing, Zhang Shiquan was agitated. “How is that possible?! I checked it over and over again!”

“It’s simple,” Lin Qingyu said. “Someone in Lanfeng Pavilion working for Lady Liang took the page at the last moment.”

“It might be Fengqin,” Lu Wancheng said casually. “She’s quite loyal to Lady Liang.”

When he said that, everyone gawked at him.

Lu Wancheng found it amusing. “Why are you all looking at me?”

“How do you know that?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“Observation.”

Huantong was shocked. “How could you tell us something that important so late, Young Marquess?!”

Lu Wancheng felt surprised too. “Lady Liang has been in power here for years. Aside from Hualu, who my grandfather sent, Lady Liang selected everyone in Lanfeng Pavilion personally. So everyone more or less listens to Lady Liang—didn’t you know that?”

The others were blank-faced for a moment. Then Lin Qingyu calmly said, “Thank you for the reminder, Young Marquess. Now we know.”

“I’ll confront her right now!” Huantong angrily exclaimed.

“No need,” Lin Qingyu said, stopping him. “Let her do what she wants.”

“Young Master…? Why?” Huantong asked incredulously.

“Let me guess.” Lu Wancheng smiled. “Does someone want to do something *bad*?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t refute him. “She started it.”

Lu Wancheng watched Lin Qingyu with mirth in his eyes. “Don’t worry, Physician Lin. You’re beautiful even doing bad things.”

“You can sleep as much as you want, Young Marquess, but you can’t *say* what you want,” Huantong told him somberly. “My young master is kind and generous, and he’d never do bad things!”

This struck Lin Qingyu rather speechless.

Lu Wancheng smiled slightly. “He hasn’t done bad things yet, but he’s definitely *thought* about them. He might misbehave in the future.”

Lin Qingyu’s chest tightened a bit. Huantong had grown up with him, and—not knowing some of Lin Qingyu’s hidden thoughts—viewed him as a kind person. Yet Lu Wancheng, who’d only known Lin Qingyu for a few months, saw right through him.

He’d thought that once he married into this wealthy family, he would have to tolerate being humiliated, struggling as he rotted. But he’d never thought that he would meet a sort of…confidant.

Lin Qingyu looked at the man lying on the bed—seriously ill, yet still lazy—with something hidden in his eyes. He smiled slightly. “You’re wrong.”

Lu Wancheng didn’t really care. “Then I’m wrong, I guess.”

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Lu Wancheng’s cough started again. He coughed whether he was awake or asleep; he even woke himself up coughing.

Waking up now, he reflexively looked toward the screen. When he didn’t see anyone behind it, he forced himself to sit up and spotted Lin Qingyu standing by the window instead.

His figure stood tall and alone, appearing lonely and cold, as if gilded in light.

Lu Wancheng stared at him for a long time, entranced. Before he realized it, he said, “Qingyu?”

“Here.”

“Why aren’t you asleep yet?”

Lin Qingyu was silent for a long while, then answered, “You said I’m beautiful when I do bad things.”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Hey. If you bring that up, then I won’t be sleepy anymore.”

Lin Qingyu turned around to look at him. “If the ‘bad’ thing I did was to poison someone, or even…take someone’s life, would you still think I was beautiful?” he asked quietly.

Lu Wancheng flinched slightly, his breath concealing a hint of excitement and anticipation. He slowly smiled. “Of course. I love the way you look when you use

poison.”

Chapter 13

THE CURRENT CROWN PRINCE of the Great Yu Empire, who was also the emperor's eldest son, had become the master of the Eastern Palace three years earlier. His birth mother, Noble Consort Chen, had long been the emperor's most favored among all the concubines of the six palaces, with a high status beneath only the empress herself. On Noble Consort Chen's fortieth birthday, all titled noblewomen would enter the palace to greet her and present their gifts.

The steward managing the residence's storerooms came to deliver a list to Lin Qingyu. "Everything we have in the residence is written here. Lady Liang has requested that you pick an appropriate gift from this list, Young Lord."

Lin Qingyu gave all the listed items a cursory glance. "According to the records Lady Liang gave me, the Eastern Palace bestowed a pair of mutton-fat jade scepters upon the marquess last year. Why aren't they in the storerooms?"

"Lady Liang delivered them to the minister of national defense to congratulate him on his son's wedding," the steward replied.

Lin Qingyu continued, "And where is the thousand-year-old ginseng received from Noble Consort Chen?"

The steward replied with a smile, "It was used to nourish Eldest Young Master, naturally."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Understood. You can take your leave now. I'll have the gift prepared as Lady Liang wishes tomorrow, before she enters the palace."

Lady Liang had only stipulated that the gift be of equal value to those previously bestowed upon them. The gift should also convey the residence's respect for Noble Consort Chen, but at the same time, it shouldn't imply any intent to overstep boundaries or curry favor. The marquess's household was related to the empress by marriage, which only made things more complicated.

The empress herself had given birth to a son, but he couldn't inherit the empire, as he'd been born intellectually incapable. He wasn't favored by the emperor either, so he lived in a temporary imperial abode in the countryside near the capital. The empress missed her son greatly, which led her to resent Noble Consort Chen and her son, the crown prince.

The empress was less doted on than the consort, but she was still the matriarch of the country. While presenting a gift to Noble Consort Chen, the marquess's residence also needed to be careful not to slight the Central Palace. The numerous factors that would feed into this decision could never be fully encapsulated in a simple request.

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Lin Qingyu chose a few items from the list to have moved into Lanfeng Pavilion so that he could examine them one by one.

Noticing gift boxes of various sizes in the room, Lu Wancheng asked, “What are these?”

“Potential birthday presents for Noble Consort Chen,” Lin Qingyu said.

“Noble Consort Chen?” Lu Wancheng’s brow furrowed—a rare sight. “The crown prince’s mother?”

“Yes.”

Lu Wancheng’s expression shifted slightly. “When did you establish ties with the Eastern Palace?”

Lin Qingyu explained that Lady Liang had requested that he prepare this gift.

Lu Wancheng still seemed worried. “You won’t enter the palace or meet the crown prince, will you?” he asked.

This response aroused Lin Qingyu’s suspicion. “No,” he said. “But I haven’t seen you pay such close attention to anything before. Why did this mention of the Eastern Palace garner such a reaction from you?”

Lu Wancheng hesitated for a moment, then said with a smile, “He’s the crown prince. The future emperor. Isn’t that enough reason for me to fuss?”

“The empress is your aunt by blood and the crown prince’s nominal mother,” Lin Qingyu replied. “That essentially makes the crown prince your cousin.”

Lu Wancheng clicked his tongue. “As if I *want* such a horribly greasy cousin.”

Their conversation about the Eastern Palace ended there.

Lu Wancheng seemed distracted, but he nevertheless remembered to remind Lin Qingyu, “If Lady Liang is bold enough to stir trouble through Noble Consort Chen, she probably thinks that it’s about time.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Don’t worry, Young Marquess. I know what I should do.”

The next day, Lady Liang woke an hour earlier than usual. As Auntie Liu waited on her and helped her don formal garments, Lady Liang asked, “Which courtyard did the marquess stay in last night?”

“Concubine Pan’s,” Auntie Liu answered.

Lady Liang’s face darkened. “Her again.”

“She is of lowly origin and hasn’t been able to bear any children, so you needn’t be angry at her, Lady—she isn’t worthy of your ire.”

“You have a point.” Lady Liang studied the woman in the mirror. She was beautiful, even now, in her older years. “The marquess should arrive for breakfast soon. Head to Lanfeng Pavilion and summon *him*.”

No matter which concubine the marquess had stayed with the previous night, he always had breakfast with his wife the next day and listened to her report about sundry matters in the estate. After all, although it was fine if he didn’t wish to concern himself with household matters, he should at least have an idea of what was going on in the manor.

During breakfast, Lady Liang brought up Noble Consort Chen’s birthday.

“That matter may seem unimportant, but in truth, it’s crucial,” the marquess declared. “Where is the gift you prepared? Let me see it.”

Just then, a servant came over with a message. “Master, Lady, the young lord is here.”

“Oh, what a coincidence,” Lady Liang said with a smile. “As I grow older, I find myself without the energy to manage all the residence’s numerous tasks. I’ve been thinking of delegating some duties to Qingyu, so I tasked him with managing the residence’s accounts some time ago. I also had him prepare Noble Consort Chen’s birthday present—he’s probably here today about that. We still have some time before your morning audience with the emperor, so perhaps you can stay and look at what he’s prepared.”

The marquess nodded. “Have him come in, then.”

Lin Qingyu entered the room. He was followed by Fengqin and Huantong, who bore books and an exquisite gift box respectively. The young lord greeted the marquess and his wife, as was mandated.

The marquess looked at the box. “Is this the gift you’ve prepared for Noble Consort Chen?”

“Yes. Please have a look.” Lin Qingyu glanced at Fengqin, and she presented the gift box, her hands trembling slightly.

The box’s shape suggested that it contained something long. Indeed, it opened to reveal a rolled painting.

The marquess ordered it unrolled. When he saw the image, his expression grew angry, and he rose abruptly from his seat. “How dare you?!”

Lady Liang forced down the raised corners of her lips before she rose as well, saying with disbelief, “This painting is from five centuries ago. It’s by a famous artist from the kingdom of Shu. It’s a family heirloom! How dare you set about giving it away?”

“Many would want to buy this painting, but its value cannot be measured,” the marquess continued. “His Majesty, who is partial to art, has commanded me several times to bring this painting with me to the palace so that I can appreciate it alongside him. I’ve taken the initiative to present it to him as a tribute, but as he is considerate of his officials, he has always refused to accept it. Yet now you plan to present it to Noble Consort Chen—the crown prince’s mother?!” The marquess slammed his fist on the table, furious. “His Majesty is most wary of close connections between powerful officials and the crown prince. Do you know how terrible a catastrophe you almost caused?”

Lin Qingyu cast his gaze down. “I dare not cause any trouble.”

“You dare not?” the marquess boomed in fury. “The acute intelligence of Head Imperial Physician Lin’s son is common knowledge. I have reason to think that you purposefully attempted this to endanger my household!”

“We’re fortunate that the marquess looked at the box’s contents,” said Lady Liang, still sounding fearful. “If His Majesty had ever seen this painting in Noble Consort Chen’s palace, who knows what doubts he’d have had about the relationship between the marquess and the crown prince?”

Lady Liang gave Auntie Liu a look that meant it was time for her to add fuel to the fire as usual. But Auntie Liu’s face was twisted oddly, and her posture was extremely unsightly. Lady Liang lowered her voice and asked, “What’s wrong with you?”

“I was probably bitten by some insect,” Auntie Liu whispered back. “A terrible itch is creeping all over my body.”

How inappropriate this development was, especially at this important time. Displeased, Lady Liang snapped, “The marquess is still present. Be more mindful of your manners.”

Auntie Liu forced herself to bear the itch. “Yes, Lady.”

“Now that I’ve married into the household, I no longer have a route by which to escape it,” Lin Qingyu said calmly. “If I thrust the household into danger, I would undoubtedly be implicated as well. I chose this painting because Lady Liang asked me to.”

Lady Liang’s eyes widened in shock. “What nonsense!” she exclaimed.

“It was you who said that Noble Consort Chen’s birthday gift must be as valuable as the gifts we’d received, Lady.”

The marquess and marchioness weren’t each other’s first spouses. Still, they’d spent years in wedlock, whereas Lin Qingyu was merely a daughter-in-law whom the marquess rarely saw—so of course the marquess believed Lady Liang over Lin Qingyu. “She was right,” the marquess said. “You simply needed to prepare a gift of equal value. But have you done that?!”

“The crown prince once gave the marquess a pair of mutton-fat jade scepters from the previous dynasty,” Lin Qingyu replied. “Those were equally priceless—comparable to the painting.”

“What mutton-fat jade scepters?” the marquess demanded sharply. “The crown prince has never bestowed those upon me.”

Lady Liang appeared to rack her brain. “I don’t remember that happening either.”

Lin Qingyu furrowed his brow. “You don’t? But they were recorded in the book Lady Liang gave me,” he said. “Huantong?”

Huantong presented the book to the marquess, who read it quickly. As he finished, his gaze hardened, and he angrily tossed the book at Lin Qingyu. “Look it over yourself. Where are the mutton-fat jade scepters you talked about?”

Lin Qingyu cocked his head, dodging the book, then picked it up and read through it. “As you said…there’s no record of it.”

The marquess pointed at Lin Qingyu. “What else can you say for yourself?!”

Auntie Liu was still battling against the strange things happening to her body, too indisposed to utter a single word. Lady Liang could only mutter herself, “Qingyu, what’s affecting you? Books have twice ended up with missing pages, and today… Ah.” She ended with a sigh.

“Books? What books?” the marquess asked.

“It’s not an important matter, Marquess,” Lady Liang said hesitantly. “We needn’t discuss it.”

“Tell me!”

Left with no choice, Lady Liang could only explain everything about the account books.

This thoroughly enraged the marquess; he was certain that Lin Qingyu had made the blunder on purpose. “Servants! Punish him according to the household’s rules!”

Lin Qingyu’s gaze swept everyone’s faces as he said slowly, “There’s no record of the mutton-fat jade scepters in the books now, but I clearly remember seeing them recorded. Why? And both times an account book ended up missing a page, I remembered it as complete, yet both ended up one page short when they reached you, Lady. Again, why is that so?”

“Because you didn’t safeguard either book, naturally,” Lady Liang blurted out.

“I didn’t safeguard them, you say?” Lin Qingyu chuckled softly. “Couldn’t someone have removed the pages on purpose?”

“Qingyu, are you trying to implicate someone else at this point?” Lady Liang shook her head. “Such disgraceful conduct means that you aren’t worthy of Wancheng, nor of being the wife of this estate’s young master!”

Just as Lady Liang finished her sentence, Auntie Liu suddenly collapsed to the floor beside her with a *thud*. She writhed and twisted like a madwoman, tearing her clothes off and muttering gibberish.

Before anyone could absorb this terrifying sight, Fengqin—who stood behind Lin Qingyu—collapsed and began to writhe on the floor as well. She bit hard on her lip to curb the urge to rip her clothes off, attempting to keep her dignity as a young woman. However, she couldn’t stop herself from banging her head against the ground. *Thump, thump, thump*. It was like the toll of a death knell.

Everyone present looked on in horror. Several servant girls shrieked in astonishment. Lady Liang, who stood closest to Auntie Liu, froze on the spot, unable to take one step. She reached out, calling in abject terror, “M-Marquess…”

Lin Qingyu continued. “The pages from the account books went missing in Lanfeng Pavilion. That naturally means that someone tampered with them there. To catch them in the act, the young marquess had me infuse the page that mentioned the mutton-fat jade scepters with specially made poison. Once someone touches that substance, they feel itching all over their body, and pustules grow on their skin. It isn’t fatal, but they feel agony worse than death.

“Before poisoning that page, I told the servants repeatedly never to touch the records Lady Liang had delivered. I expected the poison to end up affecting someone from Lanfeng Pavilion…” Lin Qingyu paused and gave Lady Liang an impassive look. “But I didn’t expect Auntie Liu, your most trustworthy servant, to fall victim to it as well.”

Since the marquess was shrewd, he understood what was going on after connecting these so-called coincidences. He turned back to stare at Lady Liang, who looked befuddled.

“I didn’t know, Marquess—I didn’t know that this was the case…” An idea abruptly came to her, and she threw the blame back at Lin Qingyu. “Perhaps Lin Qingyu here dosed them on purpose just to frame me! What have I done to you, Young Lord Lin, for you to act so cruelly?”

Lin Qingyu sneered. He walked over and stood in front of Fengqin, looking down at her. “It hurts, doesn’t it?” he asked.

Biting her lip until it bled, Fengqin struggled to speak. “Y-Young Lord, please __”

“I can administer the antidote to you both, but I want to know where you hid the missing pages. Understand?”

Auntie Liu yanked her sleeves until the fabric ripped, revealing a large expanse of her arm, which was completely covered in pustules. The horrifying sight made a young servant girl gag. Hearing the word “antidote,” Auntie Liu no longer cared about anything else. “L-Lady Liang had me burn them…”

Lady Liang shook her head. “No, Marquess!” she protested. “I didn’t… Lin Qingyu is forcing them to confess under duress! You can’t believe what they say, Marquess!”

“If you don’t believe me, Marquess, you can ask Steward Wang in the accounts room,” Lin Qingyu interjected. “He hasn’t been poisoned, so he’s fully conscious. I’m certain that your fair and just methods can unearth the truth.”

The marquess closed his eyes. “Servants, take these two madwomen away.”

After Fengqin and Auntie Liu were hauled off, silence filled the room. The servants didn’t dare even to breathe until the head steward reminded the marquess, “It’s time for you to visit the court, Marquess. Lady…you should head to the palace as well.”

After such a debacle, Lady Liang’s bun was in disarray, and her makeup was a mess. The family matriarch was in a sorry state, her dignity gone.

“Go wash up and choose another present for Noble Consort Chen,” the marquess told her sternly. “I’ll deal with the other matters after I return from court.”

He then turned and marched away.

After returning from the palace, the marquess himself interrogated Steward Wang from the accounts room. No one knew what the exact truth was; they only knew that Lady Liang knelt in the ancestral hall the whole night, which led her to fall sick the next day. To ensure that she could recuperate without any worries, the marquess entrusted the general affairs of the household to the young master’s male wife and to Concubine Pan.

This was essentially what Lin Qingyu had expected. The marquess took his image seriously. He wouldn’t punish Lady Liang, since she was his wife, but everyone knew that things within the estate would no longer be the same.

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After that, Lu Wancheng’s health took a turn for the better, and he was able to get out of bed. The medicine he needed to drink daily had changed. When Hualu carried a bowl of the new medicine to him, he only needed to take a sniff to know that it wasn’t his usual treatment. “Did Physician Zhang change the prescription?”

“No,” Hualu answered. “The young lord prescribed this.”

Lu Wancheng abruptly spat out the medicine in his mouth.

Lin Qingyu happened to witness this as he entered the room. “Have you lost the ability to take medicine as well?” he asked derisively.

Hualu swiftly dealt with the mess as Lu Wancheng hacked his lungs out. Despite his harsh question, Lin Qingyu walked over and sat on the side of the bed, then lightly stroked Lu Wancheng's back to help him catch his breath.

Lu Wancheng again picked up the extremely faint scents of paper and ink on Lin Qingyu, mixed with the fragrance of herbs. The young lord smelled like an immortal being who'd been harvesting herbs in the depths of the mountains, as if he'd just walked out of a book.

Whenever Lu Wancheng was too lazy to do anything, he grew vacant, observing the people around him. Thanks to that habit, he developed the ability to read faces. Now, for example, he could tell that Lin Qingyu wasn't in a good mood, given his repellently frigid demeanor.

Lu Wancheng dared not risk offending him, so he used a tentative tone to ask, "Why did you change the medicine, Qingyu?"

"Why do you think?" Lin Qingyu asked expressionlessly.

Lu Wancheng waved to Hualu, telling her to leave, then asked with a low chuckle, "Am I taking too long to die?"

"Yes," Lin Qingyu sneered. "So I'm poisoning you."

"Oh." Lu Wancheng picked up the bowl of medicine beside him and drained it.

Lin Qingyu's brow furrowed slightly. "What're you doing now?"

Lu Wancheng licked his lips. "Well, if you really wanted to poison me, you wouldn't have waited till now, and you wouldn't have let Hualu know that you changed the prescription. You thought that Physician Zhang's prescription was inadequate, so you switched to something better."

Lin Qingyu abruptly rose from his seat as if Lu Wancheng had guessed his motivations accurately. "You think you're so smart? Just drink it if you want. As if I care."

Lu Wancheng yanked the hem of Lin Qingyu's robe to keep him from leaving. "Are you angry *again*, Physician Lin?"

"No. The sight of you annoys me, that's all."

Lu Wancheng thought back on everything he'd done recently. "What have I done wrong?" he asked innocently, feeling lost.

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say in response.

Lu Wancheng had done nothing wrong. And he'd never said that he wanted to live longer. Lin Qingyu had only missed the opportunity to sit the Imperial Academy of Medicine's entrance exam because he'd gone soft for one moment and, in turn, made a mistake.

Having missed this exam, however, he would still have a chance to sit it three years later. Lu Wancheng, on the other hand, had only so much time left, and he would lose everything when he died.

Lin Qingyu softened slightly. "My father gave me this prescription, and I fine-tuned it for you. It can extend your life for six months, though not save it, and you'll suffer less in your final days. When the time comes…you'll at least still have some dignity."

Lin Qingyu had met many people on the brink of death due to serious illness. However presentable they'd been before, they never looked good when death came. Unable to take care of themselves, they relied on others for everything, and they were always bone-thin and ashen-faced in their final moments. Lu Wancheng, who shone brightly, shouldn't wither away in the throes of such suffering.

Lu Wancheng himself didn't care too much about that, though. "You're saying that I can live six more months if I take this medicine?"

Lin Qingyu cast his gaze down, not looking at Lu Wancheng. "Yes."

Something flickered in Lu Wancheng's eyes, and he gulped. "Qingyu."

"What?"

After saying Lin Qingyu's name, Lu Wancheng fell silent, which unexpectedly made Lin Qingyu feel a tad awkward.

"Don't misunderstand my intentions," said Lin Qingyu. "'One's life is exceptionally precious, worth a thousand taels of gold. Saving a life is a virtuous deed more valuable than that.'[9] As a medical practitioner, I can't just watch an innocent die without doing something to save them."

When Lu Wancheng spoke again, his voice was hoarse. "But you can't save my life."

"I know. But as long as I do my utmost, I can reflect on this in the future without any shame or guilt."

The corners of Lu Wancheng's lips quirked upward slightly as he laughed, his eyes shining beautifully, but what he said then was as infuriating as always: "Aiya! Has the cruel, merciless beauty turned over a new leaf just for me?"

Finding his disdain difficult to mask, Lin Qingyu refused to respond directly to Lu Wancheng's words. "You have an overly high opinion of yourself, Young Marquess."

Lu Wancheng sat up straighter so that he could whisper in Lin Qingyu's ear. "Thank you, Qingyu."

His sudden proximity caught Lin Qingyu off guard. His expression, as frigid as the icicles hanging from the roof, started to waver. "So will you keep taking this medicine or not?"

"If I don't take it, your efforts will go to waste, won't they? Oh, right—" Lu Wancheng remembered something important. "Will taking it mean that I'm strong enough to lift you?"

Lin Qingyu had no idea why Lu Wancheng was so fixated on lifting him. He raised his eyebrows slightly. "Do you want to do that so badly?"

Lu Wancheng nodded. "I really want to."

Lin Qingyu smiled coolly. "Well, don't even think about it. It'll never happen in this lifetime."

Chapter 14

ONCE LIN QINGYU became one of the two people in charge of the household's affairs, a continuous stream of people sought him out every day.

News that the young lord had poisoned people spread throughout the residence. Everyone gradually came to understand what this beauty—as venomous as a snake or scorpion—was capable of, and they looked at him with fearful respect. They reported everything to him, from important matters such as the distribution of monthly allowances within the residence to more trivial things such as what flowers they were planting in the yard, not daring to make any decision by themselves.

This annoyed Lin Qingyu immensely, since he'd never been interested in the residence's mundane affairs. Inconsequential matters like what flowers to plant and what late-night meals to make could be handed over to Lady Pan. Still, perhaps it was a good thing to have a say over the important matters.

Lin Qingyu found a certain someone reclining in a rocking chair and listening to the rain with his eyes shut. "Have several trustworthy stewards manage the residence's affairs alongside me," the young lord instructed.

Lu Wancheng opened his eyes and said teasingly, "Oh? You disagree with doing things that way, if I recall correctly. I quote, 'You can't rely on others for everything. In the future, when you're too lazy to eat, sleep, or get married and have children, will you have others do those things for you too?'"

Lin Qingyu paused before saying calmly, "Things are different now."

"Well, getting the stewards will be easy," Lu Wancheng assured him, chuckling. "I'll write Grandpa another letter."

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Do it."

"Grind some ink for me, then," Lu Wancheng casually joked. He figured Lin Qingyu would reject him emotionlessly once again.

However, the other man merely hesitated for a moment before saying, "Sure."

Lu Wancheng felt shocked, unaccustomed to such an honor. He stood in front of the window in his study, holding a brush, while Lin Qingyu stood quietly at his side, personally grinding Lu Wancheng's ink.

Despite the ink's potent fragrance, Lu Wancheng still detected a whiff of the faint scent of herbs on Lin Qingyu. He couldn't help feeling perplexed; when had his sense of smell become so sharp?

It tended to rain more often during spring, and the showers now had yet to cease, despite having gone on for a few days. The sky outside the window was foggy as it drizzled, the raindrops swirling into a tangled mess of silk ribbons reminiscent of romance.

Lu Wancheng wrote slowly, as if he seldom did so, yet his calligraphy was excellent. Letters were private, so Lin Qingyu didn't deliberately try to read what he was writing, only glancing at the paper absently.

It was said that one's calligraphy always resembled oneself. Lu Wancheng's penmanship was full of vitality, as unrestrained as clouds in the sky, as free-flowing

as a stream. It was hard to imagine that it was produced by a man plagued with chronic illness.

After writing just a few sentences, Lu Wancheng felt like slacking again. “My hand aches. I’m so tired.”

“You can write sitting down,” Lin Qingyu suggested.

“I wouldn’t dare. That wouldn’t be at all elegant or sophisticated.”

Huantong came in to deliver refreshments, only to be shocked at the sight of the young marquess writing and the young lord keeping him company. Only after some time did Huantong finally remember why he’d arrived in the first place. “Young Master, the kitchens sent a box of plum-blossom cakes.”

“Leave them over there,” Lin Qingyu said.

Huantong set the cakes down on the desk. Surprised at the sight of Lu Wancheng’s handwriting, he remarked, “Despite your indolence, your calligraphy is amazing, Young Marquess!”

“‘Amazing’ is too strong,” Lu Wancheng said humbly. “It looks as nice as the next person’s, I’d say.”

Lin Qingyu said slowly, “Your calligraphy looks as though you’ve put effort into practicing it.”

“Yep.”

Studying calligraphy wasn’t merely one day’s work. It looked as though Lu Wancheng had practiced for several years at least, so Lin Qingyu couldn’t help but express doubts. “You complained about your hand aching after writing only a few characters. Would *you* ever be in the mood to practice calligraphy?”

“Ah, I was forced to practice it. I was hyperactive as a child, and my dear mother heard that practicing calligraphy could quiet the heart, so she paid lots of money to have a famous calligrapher tutor me. They taught me calligraphy and guided me in reading the classic texts.” Lu Wancheng lowered his eyes, looking both pained and nostalgic at the same time. “My mother always strove to be the best. And she didn’t just apply that to herself—she also asked it of me. I was to master all sorts of things, from musical instruments and chess to calligraphy and drawing. I needed to be first in everything. What a pity—I had to attend so many classes when I was young, I never got enough sleep…”

“You really had it bad, Young Marquess!” Huantong said sympathetically. “You had to do all that despite being sick? You were worse off than even us servants!”

“He’s talking nonsense,” Lin Qingyu remarked impassively.

Huantong’s eyes widened. “Huh?”

“Have you ever heard him call Lady Liang his ‘dear mother’?”

Huantong scratched his head. “Good point.”

“The ‘dear mother’ he’s talking about was probably someone else,” Lin Qingyu guessed.

Lu Wancheng didn’t offer a rebuttal. He merely smiled. “You saw right through me.”

Halfway through writing the letter, Lu Wancheng wasn't sure how to phrase a sentence, and he paused. As he was deep in thought, his mind drifted, and his gaze gradually became vacant. The way he gripped the brush changed as well. He'd been holding it casually, but with a forceful flick, it twirled between his fingers in a series of fluid motions.

In the blink of an eye, ink droplets flew through the air, landing on Lin Qingyu and Huantong beside him. The former fared better than the latter—several drops of ink did hit Lin Qinyu, but half of the unlucky servant's face was splattered by a thick ink streak. His mouth had been open in shock, so he had the misfortune of tasting the ink. Registering what had happened, he spat it out. "Bah!"

As he realized his mistake, Lu Wancheng set the brush down quickly and apologized to them. "I'm sorry. I forgot this brush had ink on it…"

"Can't you be normal for a second?" Lin Qingyu asked expressionlessly.

Lu Wancheng wanted to laugh, but doing so just then wouldn't have been nice, so he tried not to. "It really wasn't on purpose… I'll wipe that off for you."

He raised his hand. Drops of ink had landed under Lin Qingyu's eye, blending with his beauty mark. When Lu Wancheng reached out, Lin Qingyu blinked reflexively; his long eyelashes fluttered beneath Lu Wancheng's fingers like butterfly wings. They were soft to the touch, making Lu Wancheng's fingertips tingle.

Lu Wancheng froze; he stopped breathing for a moment, his hand hovering in the air.

Lin Qingyu didn't notice. He swatted Lu Wancheng's hand away and said coolly, "Can ink stains be wiped away with your bare hand, hm?"

"Oh, right." Lu Wancheng came to his senses and said, "Huantong, go grab some handkerchiefs and wipe the young lord clean."

"I haven't managed to spit all the ink out yet!" Huantong cried.

Hualu came with a basin of warm water, and Lin Qingyu wiped off his face with a wet cloth.

Meanwhile, Hanqiao—Lady Pan's personal maid—came looking for Lin Qingyu. "Concubine Pan requests that you head to the front hall, Young Lord."

"Noted," Lin Qingyu replied.

It was prudent for men and women to be reserved around each other, so Lin Qingyu rarely met with Lady Pan, although they shared the responsibility of managing the estate. Instead, they usually passed messages to each other through their servants if the need arose. Yet Lady Pan's sudden invitation must have meant that she needed to talk to him in person.

"I'm going out," he told Lu Wancheng. "Finish your letter and have it delivered to the duke's estate as soon as possible."

Lu Wancheng acquiesced absentmindedly. He soon returned to the window; there, he gazed at Lin Qingyu's silhouette holding an umbrella in the rain, then looked down at his fingertips.

"What the hell was that?" he muttered to himself, perplexed.

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Lady Pan came from a family of officials. Her family's economic situation had unfortunately taken a turn for the worse, forcing her to marry as a concubine to make a living. Despite hailing from a family in gradual decline and having no children, she'd managed to find favor with the marquess—not only thanks to her appearance, but also because of her quiet personality. She never fought for anything, nor did she ever speak out of turn in front of the marquess. The court's affairs were tiresome enough, and when the marquess returned to the residence, all he wanted was a brief moment of respite. Lady Pan was undoubtedly the best person to go to for that.

To avoid any misunderstandings, Lin Qingyu and Lady Pan always met with multiple servants in tow. This occasion was no exception. Lin Qingyu was not particularly fond of anyone in the residence, but Lady Pan had given him and Lu Wancheng a wedding gift and sent over some ointment patches when he'd sprained his ankle. Thus, Lin Qingyu didn't really dislike the woman; he was merely neutral toward her.

Despite his reluctance to meet Lady Pan, Lin Qingyu exchanged some pleasantries with her. Then he said, "If there is an important matter to broach, you can tell me about it directly."

Lady Pan nodded. "Qingming is in a few days, and our branch of the Lu family is in charge of the ancestor-honoring ceremony in the Lu hometown of Lin'an. As a filial gesture, the marquess has lit two eternal lamps[10] for his parents at Changsheng Temple in the countryside. Usually, the marchioness would visit that temple to burn incense and pray for the ancestors' blessings and protection during this time. She has yet to recover from her sickness, however, and the marquess…" Lady Pan trailed off.

Ever since the debacle regarding Noble Consort Chen's birthday present, Lady Liang had scarcely appeared in public. Everyone was told that she was recovering from a bout of sickness, but in reality, she was being sequestered. The marquess of Nan'an—a powerful man of high status—was arrogant and proud, and he couldn't stomach the humiliation of being deceived. Lady Liang's misstep hadn't been grave, but it wasn't trivial either. She was guilty of violating the marquess's taboo, so she'd certainly have to suffer the consequences.

"If that's the case, we'll leave it to you," Lin Qingyu said.

Lady Pan shook her head. "I'm merely a concubine—I can't possibly burn incense to the ancestors in the marchioness's stead. As the young master's main wife, you're the only person in the family aside from her who can burn incense for the ancestors."

Lin Qingyu was noncommittal at first, however. If someone wanted him to burn incense for the Lu family's ancestors, he might well snuff out the eternal lamps the marquess had sustained for over a decade. That said, it would be nice to take the opportunity to visit Changsheng Temple and pray for his family.

"Certainly," Lin Qingyu said. "I'll arrange the trip."

"The roads are slippery when it rains," Lady Pan reminded him. "You can wait for the rain to stop before you depart."

Lin Qingyu inclined his head in reply and bade Lady Pan farewell.

She watched as he began to leave, then suddenly said, "Please stay for a moment, Young Lord."

"Is there something else?" he asked.

Lady Pan walked toward Lin Qingyu and bowed. "Ten years ago, when I hadn't yet married into the household, I lived with my mother and made ends meet by doing laundry and weaving. The winters were so bitter that my mother caught cold. Her condition persisted for days, pushing her to the brink of death. But we were poor, so we couldn't afford to get her treated or buy any herbs. With only a few copper coins on me, I begged Changxihe Apothecary for help, only to be harassed by a lecher passing by. Thankfully, Physician Lin happened to be there picking out herbs, and he lent me a hand. Not only did he come to my home with me to treat my mother, but he also paid for our herbs. He…saved both our lives." By the time Lady Pan finished speaking, she was sobbing.

Lin Qingyu smiled slightly. "That's certainly what my father would do."

Lady Pan turned to one side and wiped her tears before bashfully continuing, "I'm sorry for this embarrassing display. I just wanted to say that if you ever need me to help you in the future, Young Lord, I'll do my very best—so as to repay your father for saving our lives."

"Thank you, Concubine Pan," Lin Qingyu said, a hint of warmth seeping into his cool voice.

Returning to Lanfeng Pavilion, Lin Qingyu ordered that preparations begin for his Qingming trip. However, the sky still hadn't cleared, and the rain showed no sign of stopping. The dampness indoors, and the rainwater everywhere outside, brought about a strange feeling of melancholy.

Lu Wancheng was morose for several days, and when Lin Qingyu asked, he refused to reveal why. He merely heaved a long sigh in reply, facing the rain. After failing once to get an answer, Lin Qingyu didn't bother to ask again. Lu Wancheng could do what he wanted.

Today, Lu Wancheng was lazing absently in bed again. When Hualu asked him to take his bowl of medicine, he didn't react; his face was blank, as if his life were devoid of meaning.

Hualu turned to ask Lin Qingyu for help. "Young Lord, uh…"

"I'll do it," Lin Qingyu told her. "You can leave."

When she did, Lin Qingyu walked to the bed. He looked down at Lu Wancheng, asking, "What in the world is going on with you?"

Lu Wancheng offered only silence in response.

Irked, Lin Qingyu threatened, "If you refuse to tell me, I'll have Huantong yank your blankets off you at the crack of dawn every morning."

"I'm already in this state," Lu Wancheng protested, his reply getting stuck in his throat. "Can't you show even a bit of sympathy?"

"In *what* state?"

Lu Wancheng covered his face with his hands. "I—*fuck*—I don't think it's working anymore," he said painfully.

Lin Qingyu was confused. "What do you mean, you don't think it's working?"

"I mean *it's* not working," Lu Wancheng replied with difficulty. "Usually, *it's* already happened when I wake up… You know what I mean."

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

Lu Wancheng looked down at the area below his waist and added sadly, “But it just won’t get up these last couple of days.”

“Oh. That’s normal,” Lin Qingyu told him.

Lu Wancheng’s head abruptly snapped up. “Normal?”

“While improving the formula for your medicine, I added quite a number of special herbs.” Lin Qingyu sounded nonchalant, as if he were discussing what to have for dinner. “Mixing such herbs impacts a man’s…” He trailed off. “Impacts a man to some degree. But you have no use for that, anyway, so you needn’t be hung up on it.”

No use for that? I needn’t be hung up on it?!

Lu Wancheng almost spewed blood in consternation. He was momentarily lost for the words to refute such an outrageous statement. If he got angry at Lin Qingyu, the other man would get mad at *him*, and Lu Wancheng would have to coax him back to normal. And if he tried to reason with Lin Qingyu… Well, it was common knowledge that a great beauty never reasoned with an ordinary man.

Lu Wancheng bottled everything up for a few moments, but then he wound up saying, “I have no use for it now, certainly, but that’s completely different from *whether* it can be used.”

Lin Qingyu disagreed. “This is a matter of life and death. Can you tuck your useless pride away? Living a full life for six more months takes precedence over anything else.”

“But…” Lu Wancheng ventured, despite the futility.

“No buts,” Lin Qingyu said impatiently. “As a patient, Young Marquess, the only thing you should do is to follow your physician’s orders and take your medicine.”

Lu Wancheng looked down at the bowl of dark liquid. He wanted to say something but stopped, then made to open his mouth again. At last, he gave Lin Qingyu a thumbs-up and said something the young lord didn’t understand: “Badass.”

Chapter 15

LANFENG PAVILION'S ATMOSPHERE had changed recently. The laughingthrush no longer sang, the myna no longer called Physician Lin's name, and the young marquess…had wilted.

His nether regions weren't all that had wilted; his mood was flagging as well. He no longer walked his birds, enjoyed viewing his flowers, or played pitch-pot; he closed his eyes and slumped on the bed, unaffected by any worldly desire.

All the servants residing in Lanfeng Pavilion liked their masters very much. The young marquess was witty and easygoing; he often found ways to entertain both himself and his servants. When he wilted, the yard fell into gloom, without a trace of joyous laughter to be found.

Hualu and Huantong, the servants closest to their masters, felt that the most profoundly. They agreed completely that the young marquess and young lord must have quarreled—both men refused to talk to each other.

"The young marquess must've angered my young master," Huantong said with certainty. He'd observed that the young marquess occasionally ran his mouth in front of his young master, leading the young master to glare at him. Then the young marquess would tug on his sleeve and apologize, grinning. Huantong often wondered what the young marquess hoped to get out of doing all that.

Hualu sighed. "Everyone says that disagreements between married couples never last overnight. They quarrel at the head of the bed, then compromise at the foot of it. I hope they make up with each other soon."

With one statement, however, Huantong laid the truth bare: "The point is that they've never actually slept in the same bed before."

Lin Qingyu knew that Lu Wancheng was depressed, but he couldn't fathom *why* he was so morose. Not telling Lu Wancheng about the medicine's side effects had been a mistake on his part, but if he'd decided against using those herbs in favor of his father's original prescription, Lu Wancheng would've felt intolerable pain after taking the medicine. Compared to that agony, erectile dysfunction was nothing. Most importantly, even if Lu Wancheng could get it up, he'd have no use for it—he said himself that he was too lazy to move. Lin Qingyu hoped that Lu Wancheng would think that through and perk up soon.

It continued to drizzle for almost half a month. The scent of mold filled the study, dampening Lin Qingyu's desire to read. He had the servants burn dehumidifying herbs in all the rooms, calling several more over to spread out the moldy books in the cabinets so that they could dry.

With all the hustle and bustle in the study, Lin Qingyu couldn't focus on reading, so he decided to sort out the books with the servants. Randomly opening a volume called *Travels in Lin'an*, he caught sight of an annotation written with a brush. "Is this the young marquess's book?" he asked.

Hualu craned her neck to look at it, then said, "Yes. He read this book often last year. He told me that he wanted to go to Lin'an to enjoy Jiangnan's scenery."

Lin Qingyu furrowed his brow. "Did he write this note, then?"

"Definitely."

Lin Qingyu scrutinized the annotation carefully. The longer he looked at it, the more he felt like something was amiss.

In his letter to Duke Wen, Lu Wancheng's handwriting had looked similar to his penmanship from the previous year—but only in form, not in essence. It was as if…as if the writing was produced by deliberate imitation. One could imitate another's handwriting, but the essence of a person's writing would reflect their mindset and virtues. However similar the form, the essence always differed to some degree.

Lin Qingyu contemplated the annotation for a long time, then asked, "Is the young marquess awake?"

"He woke an hour ago," Hualu replied. "The duke sent several maids and stewards over, and Eldest Young Master is talking to them in the main room."

Lin Qingyu made his way there. He was about to enter when he heard Lu Wancheng's voice. "Grandpa sent you all here, so I'm putting my trust in you. I'm sure you don't need me to tell you what you should do."

"You needn't worry, Young Marquess," said an unfamiliar voice. "We'll do our utmost to relieve your burdens."

"That's where you're wrong. You're not relieving *my* burdens, but the young lord's," Lu Wancheng said casually. "I won't survive past next winter anyway. When I pass, the young lord will return to the Lin residence. I want him to leave with most of this residence's inheritance without any intervention from the marchioness—understand?"

After a brief silence, all the others said in unison, "We'll obey every command from you and the young lord, Young Marquess."

"After this is done, you'll be rewarded." Lu Wancheng sounded satisfied.

Lin Qingyu couldn't help but shut his eyes and sigh lightly, his heart heavy.

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Lu Wancheng sent the servants away. He'd just sipped his tea when someone outside called, "Greetings, Young Lord." Lu Wancheng paused momentarily, then pretended that he hadn't heard anything, blithely savoring his tea.

Lin Qingyu walked in, greeting him. "Young Marquess."

"Mm," Lu Wancheng responded, reserved.

After greeting him, Lin Qingyu said nothing further, as if he was piecing together the words he wanted to say.

This issue concerned Lu Wancheng's dignity as a man, so the young marquess didn't want to compromise so soon. The fact that he couldn't carry this beautiful man in his arms was already incredibly humiliating in itself, to say nothing of the fact that said beauty had gone on to personally take away Lu Wancheng's manly dignity. As if he could possibly tolerate that!

He didn't blame Lin Qingyu—he knew that the physician had done all this to save him. But couldn't Lin Qingyu have warned him? It had been a great shock!

Sure, Lu Wancheng could be too indolent, but he was still a man! How could he possibly not have reacted to such a thing?

Ha. He was already impotent, so what would be the point of making this great beauty happy? He should leave something like that to the leading men who could have sex seven times a day while he lay supine, waiting for death to befall him.

Lu Wancheng set his teacup down. “If you’re here to apologize, save it.”

“Don’t worry,” said Lin Qingyu. “I’m not here to apologize.”

Lu Wancheng was momentarily lost for words. “How domineering. I’m impressed.”

After some thought, Lin Qingyu suggested, “Perhaps we should vow to be sworn brothers.”

Lu Wancheng froze, then let out an enraged chuckle. “Oh—now, that’s rich. Become sworn brothers with you—the man who neutered me? Do I seem that low to you?”

Lin Qingyu tried to be patient. “I didn’t *neuter* you. The medicine is causing your impotence, and a few acupuncture needles can undo it.”

Lu Wancheng felt reassured, but that didn’t show on his face, as he sneered, “No need to adjust my regimen—I think it’s fine. I had no use for my manhood anyway, so I don’t need to be hung up on it, right?”

“Stop being dramatic.” Lin Qingyu leaned closer and slowly asked in a soft voice, “Haven’t you always wanted us to call each other brothers?”

The prospect of being called “elder brother” by Lin Qingyu made Lu Wancheng look up at the beauty in front of him. He cut a proud, aloof figure reminiscent of plum blossoms in the snow. If this could get Lin Qingyu to call him “gege,” Lu Wancheng wouldn’t really mind demeaning himself.

He propped his chin on his palm and raised an eyebrow. “Do you mean it?”

Lin Qingyu inclined his head. “I never renege on my promises.”

Lu Wancheng covered his mouth and coughed. “In that case, let’s…do it properly this time.”

Neither of them had gone through this process before, so Lu Wancheng went with what he’d read in a novella. He had Huantong prepare an incense burner, a dagger, some apricot-blossom wine, and a few cushions. Then he had a square table set up under the eaves and arranged everything neatly on it.

Hualu hadn’t witnessed such a grand event before. “What are Young Master and Young Lord doing?” she asked in curiosity.

“Can’t you see? They’re going to be sworn brothers,” Huantong said merrily.

Hualu’s eyes opened wide as she said in shock, “Sworn…what?”

“Sworn brothers. Brothers who will be together through thick and thin after they drink this cup of wine.”

Hualu appeared more lost than before, her big eyes still wide. “But they’re already husband and wife!”

Lu Wancheng picked up the dagger. “The book says that to become sworn brothers, we need to smear our blood on each other’s mouths in an oath of alliance…” he said hesitantly.

Lin Qingyu approached this ritual as if playing make-believe with a younger brother. “Every part of our bodies is a blessing from our parents. So long as we’re in earnest, it doesn’t matter whether we smear blood on our mouths or not.”

“You’re right.” Lu Wancheng lit three sticks of incense and stuck them into the burner. “Let’s just get on with it.”

The two men each cradled a cup of wine in their palms as they knelt on their cushions. “Let the honorable heavens and the earth witness our bond,” Lu Wancheng declaimed confidently. “Today, I, Lu Wancheng, will formally become Lin Qingyu’s sworn brother. ‘We don’t seek to be born on the same day, month, and year, but —’”[11] Lu Wancheng paused, then changed the line with a smile. “We have many days ahead of us; we’ll support each other through thick and thin, even if we’re reduced to munching on stones as if they’re steamed dumplings. Even if we only have water to drink, as long as we’re together, we’ll be happy.”

Lin Qingyu covered his mouth and chuckled.

The two men drank the wine that would seal the oath. Then Lin Qingyu beckoned Huantong over and helped Lu Wancheng up. Seeing the mirth in Lu Wancheng's gaze, he asked, "Happy now?"

Lu Wancheng smirked. "I have a sworn brother now—of course I'm happy. How about you, Qingyu-didi?" He looked at Lin Qingyu expectantly.

"I'm fine, Wancheng-xiong," Lin Qingyu said casually.

Lu Wancheng's smile froze on his face. "No, no. I called you Qingyu-didi, so you should call me Wancheng-gege. That's only fair."

"We were going to call each other brothers,[12] so how am I supposed to address you if not as 'xiong'?"

Lu Wancheng abruptly realized that he'd been tricked. The -revelation struck him like lightning. "Lin Qingyu, you're heartless."

Lin Qingyu found him funny. "You've made quite a fuss, so take a break. Drink your medicine, and I'll give you some acupuncture later so that you can regain your masculine dignity."

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Midway through the fourth month of the year, the rain finally stopped, and there were no clouds to be seen in the sunny sky. The sleeves of their robes billowed in the gentle breeze. This was a good day to start a trip, so Lin Qingyu didn't dally further; he readied himself to travel to Changsheng Temple immediately.

Before departing, he went to visit Lu Wancheng. To his surprise, the young marquess was already awake. He sprawled face down on the bed, deep in thought, and he seemed to be in a good mood as he greeted Lin Qingyu lazily. "Morning."

Lin Qingyu knew why Lu Wancheng was so chipper. Not quite smiling, he said, "You're so cheerful that something good must've happened, Young Marquess. I take it that the acupuncture treatment worked."

Lu Wancheng was hesitant to answer. "Uh…"

"As long as I'm here, let me inspect it."

Stunned, Lu Wancheng wrapped his blanket tightly around himself. "What do you want to inspect?"

"What do you think?" Lin Qingyu asked casually. "I've seen everything there is while studying medicine. You don't need to be shy."

"Qingyu, I think you're getting meaner and meaner," Lu Wancheng said faintly.

Lin Qingyu smiled. "Didn't you say that you like it when I do bad things, Young Marquess?"

Lu Wancheng's gaze darkened, but he chuckled. "True. If you want to look at it, Physician Lin, of course I'll have to oblige. I can't be bothered to move, though, so you'll have to do so without help."

“I’ll pass, then. You have no use for it anyway, so what’s there to look at?” Lin Qingyu said jokingly.

Lu Wancheng wanted to retort to that, but Huantong interrupted. “Young Master, the carriage is ready.”

Lin Qingyu looked out the window at the vibrant, sunny spring day. “Want to go on a trip to relieve your boredom, Young Marquess?” he asked.

“Where to?”

“Changsheng Temple.”

Lu Wancheng thought about it, then smiled. “Sure.” It just so happened that he did want to meet a certain person.

And so Lin Qingyu, joined by Lu Wancheng and Huantong, took a carriage to Changsheng Temple in the countryside.

Changsheng Temple was the most revered temple in the empire. Quiet and solemn, the unassuming site welcomed a constant stream of pilgrims. Commoners could only burn incense and worship the Buddha in the front hall, whereas the back hall welcomed only the noble and powerful. One of Lin Qingyu’s enemies—the imperial preceptor, who’d written his bazi down for the marquess’s household—practiced here, although not as a monk.

Lin Qingyu had always wanted to ask the imperial preceptor how his calculations had demonstrated that the young man’s birth date and time suited Lu Wancheng—was it destiny, or had the marriage been purposely orchestrated? He also wanted to ask whether the imperial preceptor knew that a mere sentence from him had practically ruined an innocent man’s life.

Unfortunately, the imperial preceptor meditated in seclusion all year long; he rarely saw anyone besides the emperor. It wasn’t easy for even the empress or crown prince to meet with him, and Lin Qingyu was merely the male wife of a marquess’s son.

When the monk who came over to welcome them learned who they were, he said respectfully, “Ah, Young Marquess Lu and the young lord. Please come with me. The eternal lamps the marquess has lit are in the side hall.”

“The young marquess can inspect the lamps himself. I’ll burn some incense and pray in the front hall,” Lin Qingyu said.

Lu Wancheng didn’t mind either way. “Sure.”

Lu Wancheng’s symptoms were better for the moment, but he was still weak; he needed someone with him, so Lin Qingyu had Huantong accompany him.

Meanwhile, Lin Qingyu walked to the Buddha statue and asked another monk for three sticks of incense. He lit them and knelt on the cushion, then prayed intently in silence, no one but his family in his mind.

As he stuck the incense sticks into the burner, he suddenly -remembered the joke of a ceremony a few days earlier that had made him and Lu Wancheng sworn brothers, and he felt like laughing.

Whatever Lu Wancheng was doing with the lamps would seemingly take a while. As the front hall continually welcomed a stream of visitors, the monk requested that Lin Qingyu wait in the back hall.

Lin Qingyu followed a young monk to a structure in the rear. This area was quieter than the front of the temple, with meandering paths and an elegant atmosphere. As someone who preferred quiet, Lin Qingyu immediately wanted to take a walk alone here in hopes of some peace of mind. He had the monk leave before walking aimlessly along the path, not expecting to see a blooming orchard of peach trees at the end.

Under the shade of the blossoms was a stone table, where two men sat facing each other. The handsome young man clad from head to toe in bright red was Lu Wancheng, and opposite him was an ethereal-looking man wearing blue. Lin Qingyu had a hunch that he was Imperial Preceptor Xu Junyuan of Great Yu.

Xu Junyuan was extremely handsome—his was a beauty that was scarcely seen. But Lu Wancheng didn't pale in comparison; he even had a slight edge over the other man.

Lu Wancheng sat casually under the peach blossoms; behind him, petals rained down. He looked every bit the elegant scion, as handsome and stately as a jade tree in the wind. To think that barely two hours ago, he was still sprawling in bed like a fish washed up on shore…

He was indeed skilled in putting on a show. Whenever someone else was present, Lu Wancheng would always be the most striking figure present. He was like a sparkling jewel that made everyone else look drab and dull.

Yet when he was alone with Lin Qingyu, he was always so silly and frivolous!

Lin Qingyu couldn't help thinking that he'd have it much easier if Lu Wancheng retained even one-tenth of his demeanor now in his daily routine.

Pushing back the sleeve of his robe, Xu Junyuan poured Lu Wancheng a cup of tea. "May I know why you came all the way here despite your illness, Young Marquess Lu?"

Lu Wancheng inclined his head slightly, wearing a polite and distant smile. "I have something to ask you, Imperial Preceptor."

Smiling, Xu Junyuan said, "Please ask, Young Marquess."

"In this world," Lu Wancheng said slowly, "have there been any cases of people coming back to life after death, or…of someone waking up in another body?"

Chapter 16

LIN QINGYU STOOD NEARBY, concealed by the peach blossoms. This place was fairly deserted, so he could pick up what the two men were saying fairly clearly.

This must've been why Lu Wancheng had been willing to come along—for Xu Junyuan. After all, he never chose to stand if he could sit, and never chose to sit if he could recline. Ever since their marriage, Lu Wancheng had only left the manor twice, for this trip and one to the Lin residence. Anything that spurred him into moving must have been something that even a layabout would consider important.

Lin Qingyu recalled that Lu Wancheng found the supernatural quite interesting and had mentioned wanting to meet the imperial preceptor, who was rumored to know everything about the earthly world while also being familiar with the supernatural. Lin Qingyu hadn't expected Lu Wancheng to actually come along, let alone for him to manage to meet Xu Junyuan so effortlessly and ask him such a ridiculous question.

If the dead really could come back to life or awaken in another body, there would be far less sorrow and suffering in the world. Physicians would no longer need to heal diseases or save people; they could just learn the art of resurrection, then wait until a patient died and resurrect them. Wasn't that much simpler?

Xu Junyuan seemed quite surprised—perhaps either by Lu Wancheng's question, or by how directly he asked it. The imperial preceptor ruminated over the question for a while before answering.

"Since ancient times, many have pursued immortality and the resurrection of the dead, including kings and emperors who have earned their place in history. If something cannot be achieved even when an emperor exhausts their empire's resources, it probably doesn't exist. When a mortal dies, his body disintegrates, and no one can stop that from happening. As for waking up in someone else's body…" Xu Junyuan chuckled. "Forgive me for my ignorance—but I have no idea."

Lu Wancheng raised his eyebrows. "So there are things even the imperial preceptor doesn't know about."

"Because I haven't seen it happen," Xu Junyuan said. "But that doesn't mean it doesn't occur in this world."

"Oh." Lu Wancheng no longer seemed interested in continuing this conversation, but he said politely, "I expected no less from Great Yu's only imperial preceptor. Your words are just that—words." He was basically saying that Xu Junyuan's answer was pointless drivel.

A gentle smile remained on Xu Junyuan's face. "If there really has been a case of someone waking up in another's body, I'd want to meet that person myself. However, I doubt the subject would speak about it freely, because…"

"Because he'd know that no one would believe him, even if he talked about it," Lu Wancheng said. "Even if they did believe him, that would bring him a lot of trouble."

Xu Junyuan smiled. "Wise words, Young Marquess."

“Young Master?” Huantong had popped up from nowhere, pushing Lu Wancheng’s wheelchair. Lu Wancheng had probably tired of all the walking and told Huantong to collect his wheelchair from the carriage.

When Huantong spoke, both Lu Wancheng and Xu Junyuan looked over, and Lin Qingyu walked out calmly. “Young Marquess.”

Lu Wancheng leaned on his hand, watching Lin Qingyu with a smile. But when he spoke, it was to Xu Junyuan. “Imperial Preceptor, this is my neiren.”[13]

Lin Qingyu was taken aback. It was the first time he’d heard Lu Wancheng call him that. He felt…quite awkward. He had no idea how Lu Wancheng said it so naturally.

Although Lin Qingyu *was* living in the marquess’s residence, nominally wed to Lu Wancheng, neither of them took the marriage seriously. And now that the mother-in-law he disliked had been sequestered by the marquess, Lin Qingyu forgot something from time to time—the fact that he was Lu Wancheng’s wife.

Seeing Lin Qingyu, Xu Junyuan smiled wider. “Lady Lu.”

Lin Qingyu clenched his fists in his sleeves but said blandly, “Well met, Imperial Preceptor.”

“Such elegance and poise. How fortunate you are, Young Marquess.”

Likewise staring at Lin Qingyu, Lu Wancheng replied with a smile, “I know.” He admired Lin Qingyu unabashedly, as if gazing at the most vibrant peach blossom in flower.

Lu Wancheng’s gaze made Lin Qingyu feel somewhat awkward, but he sensed that Lu Wancheng was different from those perverts who’d gawked at him—he was admiring the sight in earnest.

Lin Qingyu glared at him nonetheless. *Am I that nice to look at?*

Lu Wancheng directed his gaze elsewhere, smiling as if he were saying, *“But of course.”*

“A beautiful view, an excellent partner—what we need at this point is some nice wine.” Xu Junyuan called over a young monk. “Unearth the wine I buried under the peach trees two years ago.”

Lin Qingyu said, “In light of his illness, the young marquess shouldn’t drink.”

“My mistake.” Xu Junyuan lifted his cup toward them. “Then let me toast you both with tea in place of wine.”

Lu Wancheng was about to raise his own cup when he noticed that Lin Qingyu hadn’t moved an inch. He lowered his hand, cursing internally despite looking calm and collected.

He knew that meeting the imperial preceptor would make Lin Qingyu unhappy, and when Lin Qingyu was unhappy, Lu Wancheng would be as well. He’d screwed up.

Xu Junyuan’s smile remained on his face. “It seems that Lady Lu refuses to show me courtesy.”

“The chen hour on the eleventh day of the third month of the guiwei year.”

Xu Junyuan nodded. “If memory serves, that’s your birth date and time.”

“You have a good memory, Imperial Preceptor,” Lin Qingyu remarked coldly. “Like the young marquess, I have a question I lack the answer to, and I request your advice.”

“‘Advice’ seems an exaggeration,” Xu Junyuan said with a smile, “but please tell me your question, Lady Lu.”

Lin Qingyu’s lips parted slightly. “Why me?”

Xu Junyuan seemed to have guessed that he’d ask this question. He pointed at the sky. “It is mandated by the heavens.”

“Mandated by the heavens? Ha.” Lin Qingyu did nothing to mask the ridicule in his tone. “When I was young, I traveled throughout the land with my mentor. Frequently, we came across superstitious people who neither consulted a physician nor took any medicine. Instead, they hired so-called sorceresses to hold foolish ceremonies at their homes. If they recovered, it was naturally because of their great fortune; if they didn’t, that was mandated by the heavens—the patient’s lifespan was predetermined, and there was nothing us mortals could do about it. Are you referring to such a so-called mandate, Imperial Preceptor?”

“Both of you know better than me whether the heavens really mandated this,” Xu Junyuan said calmly. “Has your physical condition improved since the marriage, Young Marquess?”

“That’s merely a coincidence,” Lin Qingyu objected.

Xu Junyuan smiled helplessly. “If that’s what you think, Lady Lu, then I have nothing to say.”

Lu Wancheng reflected for a while. “Given what you’ve said, can you tell us how you reached that conclusion? Or are you forbidden to divulge the secrets behind the heavens’ design?”

Xu Junyuan appeared to think deeply. “I am, but I can still tell people a bit about it on occasion. You were in critical condition, Young Marquess, the day the marquess and marchioness enlisted my assistance through the empress. I divined that your life wasn’t fated to end yet, and that you stood a chance of living if you encountered a benefactor. That is all.”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Although I have a benefactor now, I still don’t have long to live, so the marriage didn’t ward off my sickness. You shouldn’t matchmake so haplessly next time, Imperial Preceptor, or you may ruin someone else’s future.”

Lin Qingyu looked sidelong at the man beside him, but Lu Wancheng had apparently said all that he wanted to say.

Xu Junyuan sighed softly. “I must say, I cannot be as indifferent as you when faced with matters of life and death, Young Marquess. Unfortunately, your fate…” Xu Junyuan paused, then looked at Lu Wancheng meaningfully. “But do you have another name aside from ‘Lu Wancheng,’ Young Marquess? I could start the divination process again with your other name.”

Lu Wancheng looked straight at Xu Junyuan, his long lashes shrouding his eyes. Only after a while did he answer, “No.”

Lin Qingyu had heard some things about Lu Wancheng’s name. His biological mother, who’d passed long ago due to difficulties in childbirth, had apparently named him. After his birth mother’s passing, Lu Wancheng was first cared for by a wet nurse; then Lady Liang looked after him herself. He hadn’t been close to either

woman, as they weren't related by blood, and neither gave him any nicknames. So why had Lu Wancheng hesitated before answering Xu Junyuan's question?

Lin Qingyu thought of the annotation in *Travels in Lin'an*, then of some nonsense Lu Wancheng had uttered on their wedding night. Lu Wancheng hadn't even known how old he was when they'd just gotten married. Lin Qingyu hadn't taken anything Lu Wancheng said to heart, assuming that he was merely acting foolish. Come to think of it, quite a few things had been suspicious.

The dead coming back to life… Awakening in someone else's body… Did something like that really exist in this world?

As if that were possible! There must have been some other reason for Lu Wancheng's behavior. The young marquess was keeping something from Lin Qingyu.

The sky gradually darkened while the men chatted, and the young monk reminded them to start their journey down the mountain soon; the roads were difficult to navigate after dark, which would mean a bumpy ride.

Xu Junyuan rose. "Safe travels," he said. "I won't be seeing you off."

Lin Qingyu nodded icily. Xu Junyuan was polite and decorous, and he hadn't used his special status to overpower his visitors; he wasn't that irksome a person. If Lin Qingyu ever had to take revenge on the man in the future, he'd consider using medicine that wasn't too venomous.

Before leaving, Lu Wancheng plucked a peach blossom. The carriage had parked by Changsheng Temple's front entrance, which was a bit of a distance from the peach orchard. The fragile young marquess no longer had the strength to walk. He fiddled idly with the peach blossom, feeling drowsy, while Huantong pushed his wheelchair. Lin Qingyu walked ahead. Both preoccupied with their own thoughts, neither man spoke for a while.

It was almost dusk, and many pilgrims were leaving the temple. Huantong noticed quite a few people in front of them turning to look at them. Annoyed, he pointed out, "So many people are turning back to see the young master, Young Marquess."

"Oh," Lu Wancheng replied absently.

Huantong's eyes widened. "Are you not concerned about that at all?" He'd been with Lin Qingyu since he was little, so he knew that his young master disliked it when strangers gawked at him. Huantong didn't like all the passersby staring at his young master either; it made him uncomfortable.

Confused, Lu Wancheng said, "What is there to concern myself over? Everyone likes to look at a beautiful face."

"It's quite different when a husband and wife are also sworn brothers," Huantong teased. "Usually, men want nothing but to hide their wives so that no one else can see them—but you, Young Marquess, let everyone look at yours without a care."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "Let them do as they please. My wife's beauty just makes me look better. Anyway, no matter how much they gawk at him, he won't be theirs. They can only look at him this once." He shook his head in sympathy, clicking his tongue. "Shame."

"You say that as if he's *yours*," Huantong muttered.

“Uh…” Lu Wancheng’s smile disappeared, but he quickly bounced back. “I can at least see him every day. Although not for long.”

Huantong felt a bit sad. It was true that he wanted to return to the Lin residence with his young master as soon as possible, but after all the time they’d spent with Lu Wancheng recently, he’d grown to like the young marquess. He’d probably shed a few tears when Lu Wancheng died.

“It isn’t even the fifth month yet. We still have a lot of time till winter,” Huantong rambled reassuringly. “You can look at him for half a year more.”

“Winter, huh…?” Lu Wancheng looked at Lin Qingyu’s back and narrowed his eyes. “I want to see your young master standing in the snow wearing a bright-red cape, holding an umbrella. With flushed cheeks and long hair as black as ink, he’ll surely be stunning.”

Lin Qingyu suddenly halted. He turned back slowly, peering at Lu Wancheng.

“Oh no,” Huantong exclaimed softly. “He heard us!”

Lu Wancheng met Lin Qingyu’s gaze. Lin Qingyu looked at Lu Wancheng quietly and steadily. Suddenly, Lu Wancheng had the odd feeling that Lin Qingyu wasn’t looking at his face, but…at *him* as a person.

“Do you really not have another name?” Lin Qingyu asked coolly.

Lu Wancheng’s heart clenched, but he spoke in a frivolous, teasing tone as always: “That’s a funny question. If I did, I would know about it, wouldn’t I?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t press further. “Let’s hope you’ll live until the first snow,” he said placidly.

Chapter 17

LIN QINGYU HADN'T WANTED to pry the truth out of Lu Wancheng. It was common for somebody to have a secret they couldn't tell anyone else. If Lu Wancheng didn't want to tell Lin Qingyu about it, there was no reason he needed to know, just as no one else knew about the noxiously evil thoughts he had on occasion…aside from Lu Wancheng, who knew everything, and not just about Lin Qingyu. He felt like Lu Wancheng saw through *everyone*. Yet the man always presented himself as a lazybones merely muddling by in life, waiting for death to come. He appeared guileless and distant from worldly affairs, yet at certain key moments, he'd resolved problems without anyone noticing. He was quite unpredictable.

What right did he have to be like that? To know everything about Lin Qingyu, when Lin Qingyu had only seen the tip of the iceberg that was Lu Wancheng?

Lin Qingyu dithered for a long time before calling Hualu over on the grounds that he wanted to tidy the study. He had Hualu dig out all of Lu Wancheng's calligraphy and art, then sort through them once again.

He didn't know where his resentment had come from or why. Regardless, now that he was questioning something about Lu Wancheng, it was normal that he was looking for an answer; no one liked having something kept from them.

Hualu had been sent to the manor by Duke Wen's household. The duchess had worried that her grandson would get bored nursing his health year-round, so she'd chosen a younger servant who was simple and unpretentious. Hualu wasn't only quick on her feet but could also read; she rapidly sorted everything Lin Qingyu wanted into chronological order.

These samples of Lu Wancheng's handwriting dated back to when he'd started learning to read and write. One could see how his handwriting transformed over the years until he was about sixteen, when its form and essence were set.

The turning point had come when Lu Wancheng grew terminally ill. He'd fallen into a coma during that time and thus been too sick to write. That had lasted for a month—until their wedding night.

The essence of his handwriting had changed after that.

Lin Qingyu flipped through a book Lu Wancheng had read recently. "When did you come to the marquess's residence?" he asked Hualu.

"I've been here three years, Young Lord," she said.

"What was the young marquess like before?"

Hualu thought back. "He spoke and smiled less, and he didn't like taking walks with his birds or playing pitch-pot." She chuckled. "After you married into the household, the young marquess's physical condition improved, and he cheered up. You're really his lucky charm, Young Lord."

Lin Qingyu didn't let his expression change. "What did he do before?"

"He liked to read travelogues. Due to his fragility, he was stuck here in the residence, and he really wanted to get out. He always said that if he ever got to visit

Lin'an in this life, he'd die happy… Bah!" Hualu slapped herself. "This mouth of mine! What wretched, unlucky words I just said!"

That lazy-to-the-bone salted fish yearned to get out of the manor, huh?

Sneering inside, Lin Qingyu asked, "He would've been quite close with both the marchioness and the young lady, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, yes. He was filial to the marchioness and doted on the young lady. Whenever the duke's residence sent over anything nice, he thought of them first."

A drastic change in Lu Wancheng's personality could perhaps have stemmed from a life-and-death incident that had transformed his state of mind. But what about the change in how he treated Lady Liang and Lu Niantao? Had someone delivered a message to him in his dreams and told him that neither mother nor daughter was a good person?

The book Lin Qingyu was leafing through was a compilation of commoners' detective stories, the title of which he remembered clearly. It had once been popular with the public, and his fellow students had been obsessed with it, leading them to neglect their studies. His shifu had given them quite a scolding.

Lin Qingyu skimmed two pages. As he'd expected, the book was interesting, pulling the reader in easily. He flipped to the third page, only to see a name circled. Beside that, an annotation in messy handwriting stood out: *This character is the killer.*

Lin Qingyu stood there, speechless.

It was quite obvious that Lu Wancheng had written these words casually, without deliberately imitating anyone. His handwriting suggested indolence, but also contained an ingenuity that couldn't be stifled—just like Lu Wancheng as a person.

"Young Master?" Huantong's voice interrupted the flow of his thoughts. "It's time for your meal. The young marquess has invited you to dine with him."

"Sure," Lin Qingyu replied. As he did so, he lifted his brush, dipped it in ink, and wrote one word beside the annotation: *Scram.*

The fifth month of the year, after the bouts of springtime rain passed, was a great time to enjoy river fish. Today's shredded ginger and carp soup was well prepared, the fish soft and the broth savory. Lin Qingyu wasn't usually that enthused about food, but even he couldn't keep from having more of the soup. Lu Wancheng, on the other hand, didn't touch it.

"Do you not like fish?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"I do."

"But I noticed that you didn't have any."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "There are too many bones in carp—eating it is a hassle. It's fine; the other dishes are tasty as well."

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say in response.

Hualu stepped forward. "I'll pick out the fish bones for you, Young Master."

"You don't need to," Lin Qingyu told her coldly. "Don't coddle him."

Lu Wancheng put his hand to his mouth. "What a temper," he said to Hualu.

"Do you once again assume that I can't hear you?" Lin Qingyu asked coolly.

They were almost finished with their meal when a servant boy reported from outside: “Young Masters, Steward Zhang is here.”

Lin Qingyu set down his chopsticks. “Have him come in.”

Zhang Shiquan gave the pair a report on the household’s income and expenses during the fourth month, mentioning one of the residence’s masters by name—the third young master, Lu Qiaosong.

Lu Qiaosong, Lady Liang’s biological son, was the youngest master in the family. Most importantly, he was physically healthy. Everyone in the residence knew that the marquess of Nan’an’s title would eventually be his.

Lin Qingyu had met Lu Qiaosong a few times in the manor, but he wouldn’t have said that he knew much about the other man. The extent of what he knew was that Lu Qiaosong was skilled in poetry and rhapsodies, particularly in the style of the Wanyue school.[14] He was also charming and unrestrained, the subject of many prostitutes’ affections. He was highly talented, yet he’d failed to rank highly in the imperial civil examinations, which led to a scolding from the marquess. After his father forbade him to cavort with prostitutes, Lu Qiaosong appeared to have reined himself in considerably, but no one knew what he got up to in private.

According to Zhang Shiquan, Lu Qiaosong’s servant boy had made a scene in the accounts room, claiming that the accountants had embezzled their monthly allowance and the sum allotted for their daily expenses. In past years, Qingdai Pavilion—where Lu Qiaosong resided—had received an allowance of five hundred taels of silver, but it was only receiving three hundred now. Lu Qiaosong had also been served five dishes and soup at each meal, but that had been reduced to four dishes and soup.

“I’ve always distributed the allowance for each pavilion following the residence’s rules. I’ve never cut any amount from an allowance. Yet that servant from Qingdai Pavilion sounded so sure—probably not because we’re giving them less, but because they received extra in the past.”

Lin Qingyu sneered. “Is Lu Qiaosong afraid that the marquess will release his mother too soon?”

Lu Wancheng grabbed some carp with his chopsticks and picked bones out slowly, heaving a drawn-out sigh. “‘We keep trapping demons and they’re all such pests!’ Heh. ‘Why are there so many causing us stress?’”[15]

Lin Qingyu frowned. “Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Oh…okay.”

Holding in his amusement, Zhang Shiquan asked Lin Qingyu’s opinion. “I don’t think Qingdai Pavilion will just shrug this off. What would you say we should do about it, Young Lord?”

“Follow the rules, naturally,” said Lin Qingyu. “If they want to fuss, let them. The bigger a fuss, the better; it’d be best if this reached the marquess.”

Predictably, Auntie Qiu—Lu Qiaosong’s wet nurse—made a scene in the accounts room again a few days later. She caused quite a big ruckus that time, rolling around on the ground and howling about how Concubine Pan and the young lord had taken revenge on them, mistreating the family’s legitimate son and abusing their rights while the household’s matriarch was ill in total disregard of the family’s rules. She cried for the marquess to stand up for them.

When Lin Qingyu arrived at the accounts room, Concubine Pan was there; she'd heard the commotion. She eyed Auntie Qiu, who was throwing a fit like a mad peasant woman, and said helplessly, "Young Lord, uh…"

Lin Qingyu approached Auntie Qiu; the volume of the woman's howls increased. "I'm sorry for the lady! Not only has she fallen sick, so has Third Young Master! The marquess's residence, grand as it is, refuses even to call over a physician to look at Third Young Master! You saw that he was physically stronger than Eldest Young Master, so you wanted to drag Third Young Master's illness out until it worsened!"

"Third Young Master has fallen sick?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"Yes," Zhang Shiquan said, "Auntie Qiu said that their pavilion couldn't afford to summon a physician and wanted us to provide them two hundred taels of silver. I said that we'd summon the physician, then deduct the cost from the household's total expenses, and she started acting like this."

"Third Young Master is much healthier than the young marquess. How could he suddenly fall sick? His servants must not have served him well."

Auntie Qiu's words got stuck in her throat. She glared at Lin Qingyu. "That's because the accountants cut our allowance! Third Young Master couldn't eat or sleep well—of course he fell sick!"

"The cause of Third Young Master's illness will be clear with a medical consult. If the allowance is indeed insufficient, I don't see why we can't increase it. But if it's because of something else…" Lin Qingyu's gaze swept over Auntie Qiu's face. "We'll treat it in another manner entirely. Let's go. We'll head to Qingdai Pavilion for an inspection."

Auntie Qiu gritted her teeth. "Third Young Master is sick and needs to rest. Qingdai Pavilion isn't at liberty to welcome you, Young Lord."

Zhang Shiquan smiled. "Have you forgotten, Auntie? The young lord here is the best physician around."

In Qingdai Pavilion, Lu Qiaosong leaned over the side of his bed, retching nonstop. Cold sweat ran down his body as he endured chills and weakness. Lu Niantao was by his side, helping him drink water and patting his back. When he saw Lin Qingyu walk in with a number of people, Lu Qiaosong's face soured, but he had to greet Lin Qingyu as etiquette dictated. "Sister-in-Law."

Lu Qiaosong could be considered a handsome fellow; he wouldn't have captured the hearts of all those prostitutes otherwise.

Lu Niantao rose. "What brings you here, Sister-in-Law?"

"I heard that Third Young Master is feeling unwell," Lin Qingyu replied. "Hence our visit."

Lu Qiaosong took after his father in that he greatly valued his dignity. The fact that so many people were now witnessing his sickly state made him so angry that he retched again. "You shouldn't concern yourself over me, Sister-in-Law…"

"No need for niceties, Third Young Master," Lin Qingyu said. He grabbed Lu Qiaosong's wrist—which was all he needed to get a sense of the situation. "'A light press detects nothing; a pulse can only be taken once more force is applied.' In short, Third Young Master has a sinking pulse…which is a sign of kidney deficiency."

Lu Qiaosong yanked his hand back, his ears reddening. “What are you going on about?” he yelled. Then he noticed everyone exchanging surprised looks, including a few servant boys who were trying not to laugh. Lu Qiaosong gripped his blankets tightly, roaring, “Get out! Get out of here, all of you!”

“Third Young Master, you’ve indulged in so much sensual pleasure that you’ve weakened your kidneys,” Lin Qingyu said blandly. “You should engage in such activities more moderately.”

Lu Qiaosong’s glare was pinned to Lin Qingyu’s face. “Perhaps my sickly elder brother can’t satisfy you, and that’s why you’re here, yapping on about nonsense!” he snapped in a low, vehement tone.

Lin Qingyu’s gaze darkened as venomous urges surged incessantly in his chest, unrestrainable. *Someone like Lu Qiaosong doesn’t need to survive,* he thought.

Hearing Lu Qiaosong’s words, Lu Niantao said sharply, “You should stop.” She was still an unmarried young woman, after all, discomfited by such crudeness.

As if Lu Qiaosong would listen to his sister while his rage remained at its height. With a twisted frown, he continued, “You framed my mother, but that’s still not enough for you. That’s why you’re coming for me now, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Lin Qingyu smiled. “Now…I don’t plan to let you off.” A servant boy was leading a physician from outside the residence to the pavilion. “I’ll leave the rest to this physician. I hope that he’s skilled at treating problems down there,” Lin Qingyu remarked derisively.

When Lin Qingyu walked out of the room, he happened to bump into that physician. He was about Lin Qingyu’s age, with handsome features and a dignified presence. He resembled a young general from the army more than a physician. Seeing Lin Qingyu, his eyes lit up, and he said excitedly, “Shixiong!”

Lin Qingyu was stunned momentarily, then said in surprise, “Shidi?”

This physician was Chang Yang, his fellow student. Lin Qingyu had finished his apprenticeship a year earlier than Chang Yang, and he’d returned to the capital to prepare for his examination, while Chang Yang continued traveling the land and studying under their mentor. Lin Qingyu had no idea when they’d returned to the capital.

“I heard that you married into the marquess of Nan’an’s household,” Chang Yang said. “I was wondering whether I’d come across you today…”

From the corner of his eye, Lin Qingyu noticed Lu Niantao staring intently at them, so he interrupted Chang Yang. “Inspecting the patient is your priority. Go. We’ll talk later.”

Chang Yang was somewhat disappointed, but he said with a smile, “I’ll do as you say, Shixiong.”

When Lin Qingyu returned to Lanfeng Pavilion, Lu Wancheng had already eaten his midday meal and was about to nap in bed. Hualu had already told him about some of the day’s events, so he asked while burrowing into his blankets, “I hear that Lu Qiaosong’s fallen ill. From what?”

“Don’t you know everything?” Lin Qingyu asked as he washed his hands. “Take a guess.”

“Judging by his character, probably a kidney deficiency,” Lu Wancheng said without thinking.

Lin Qingyu was speechless.

“I got it right? Ah—there’s a type of idiot who wouldn’t know moderation if it hit them in the head. They’ll do it seven times in a night, often until the sun rises. Lu Qiaosong’s one of them. The crown prince too.” Lu Wancheng shook his head in disapproval. “It’s people like them, who have no regard for their health, who have foisted all this toxic competition upon us. Thanks to them, if you can’t go at it seven times a night, it feels like you have no right to be a protagonist.”

“Why do you always bring up the crown prince? And how do you know these secrets?” Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes. “Are you and the crown prince…?”

“Stop.” Lu Wancheng seemed to feel genuine disgust at that. “I’m going to vomit.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “Yeah. You don’t like men.”

Lu Wancheng hesitated for a moment. “Right.”

Not wanting to continue talking about something so undignified, Lin Qingyu said, “By the way, I met my shidi in the residence just now.”

“Shidi?” Lu Wancheng’s ears pricked up. “A fellow student from when you studied medicine?”

“Yes.” Lin Qingyu sounded nostalgic. “He and I traveled the land with our mentor for six years. I haven’t seen him for just over two years. He…he’s grown a lot taller.”

“Ah, Physician Lin’s shidi grew taller.” Lu Wancheng grinned. “Maybe we should call him Tall-shidi from now on.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t bother replying to that. After some consideration, he said, “As long as we’re on the topic of my shidi, his hometown is in Lin’an. The same as yours.”

Lu Wancheng raised an eyebrow. “So?”

“Want to go on a trip to Lin’an after your condition improves?”

“No,” Lu Wancheng answered decisively. “Going out would mean a long, exhausting journey that wouldn’t let me eat or sleep well—I’d only go out and make my life worse if I went mad.”

Lin Qingyu’s gaze darkened slightly. “Is that so?”

Chapter 18

WHEN CHANG YANG TOOK Lu Qiaosong's pulse, he gave the same diagnosis as Lin Qingyu. Chang Yang wasn't one to convey it so directly, though, so he merely said, "Third Young Master Lu is exhausted from overworking. That, combined with the amount of alcohol he has imbibed recently, has caused his digestive system discomfort. Fortunately, he is young and physically fit. If he takes his medicine on time, follows a bland diet, and clears his mind of worldly desires for the next few days, he'll recover in no time."

"Thank you, Physician Chang," Lu Niantao said with a smile.

"I'll write down the prescription down, then."

Lu Niantao nodded. "I heard you call my sister-in-law 'shixiong,'" she said, deliberately casual.

Chang Yang hesitated for a while before saying, "The young lord and I were actually students under the same mentor. We haven't been in contact for a long time, though."

"What a coincidence," Lu Niantao continued, a smile on her face. "So that's why you were so overjoyed to see Sister-in-Law, Physician Chang."

Chang Yang had nothing to say in response. He wrote the prescription down and began to say his goodbyes, but Lu Niantao cut in, "Since you and Sister-in-Law used to study together, perhaps you can visit him in Lanfeng Pavilion before you leave."

Chang Yang remembered how Lin Qingyu had said that they'd talk later, so he didn't refuse. "Thank you for your kindness, Second Young Lady."

Lu Niantao had someone show Chang Yang the way to Lanfeng Pavilion and instructed another physician to fetch the necessary herbs to follow his own prescription from the apothecary. Then she made a bowl of bird's nest soup herself and brought it to the marquess, who was bent over his desk working hard, despite this being his day off. While the marquess was still gratified by her gesture, Lu Niantao brought up how Lu Qiaosong was bedridden due to his illness, adding that their worried mother had lost her appetite and grown thinner. Lu Niantao also expressed pity for poor Qiaosong, who was calling for his mother again and again in his deep sleep.

The marquess couldn't help but feel sympathetic. Two months had already passed since the debacle over Noble Consort Chen's birthday gift, and Lady Liang had been in her quarters reflecting on her mistakes the entire time, toeing the line. The marchioness was his main wife, after all, and the mother to his three children; he thought he should let her retain some dignity.

"I'm sure your mother has recovered after recuperating for such a long time," the marquess remarked impassively. "But since she must still be physically weak, she needn't worry about managing the household's affairs."

When Lady Liang was allowed to leave her quarters, she hurried to Qingdai Pavilion immediately. Finding out the real reason Lu Qiaosong had fallen sick infuriated her. "Have you forgotten the lesson the marquess taught you after you

failed the imperial examinations? You *still* had the nerve to cavort around the Bureau of Entertainment?! You're that desperate to be sucked dry by those indecent whores?"

As his mother raked him over the coals, the scholar Lu Qiaosong couldn't take any more. His shame morphed into rage, and he snapped, "I'm fine! Lin Qingyu exaggerated everything. He said in front of all the servants that I…" He trailed off, then declared, "I'd rather die than be humiliated like this! I must take revenge!"

"Stop, both of you," Lu Niantao said calmly. "Mother can leave her quarters now, which is wonderful."

"So what if I can?" Lady Liang sighed. "My birth family is incompetent, and your father has lost his trust in me now. He hasn't resumed visiting my quarters; he probably goes to Mianyue Pavilion every night."

"Mother, I've told you so many times that a childless concubine isn't a threat to you," Lu Niantao said, sounding resigned. "But Sister-in-Law, on the other hand… Lady Pan is overseeing the household's minor affairs, but Sister-in-Law controls the important matters. If you wish to reclaim control over the residence, you should focus on Sister-in-Law."

"That's what I'm confused about," Lu Qiaosong said vehemently. "Lin Qingyu is merely a male wife who married into the family to ward off Lu Wancheng's sickness. His father, the head imperial physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians, is just a fifth-rank official. So how did he force you all into this state?"

Lu Niantao's gaze swept over Lady Liang. "That's the question I want to ask too. Mother, why didn't you inform me in advance about what you'd plotted with Auntie Liu?"

Knowing how clever Lu Niantao was, Lady Liang quailed as she faced her daughter. "I-I didn't want you to worry about it."

"If you had told me about it all in advance, I'd certainly have put a stop to it. I asked Physician Zhang, and he said that Elder Brother won't live past next year. We can just wait until then. Why rush? Now you can't even oversee the residence's affairs, and you lost Father's trust as well. Even after Elder Brother passes, there'll still be Lady Pan and Sister-in-Law to handle. How will you gain sole control over the household under those circumstances?"

In retrospect, Lady Liang felt as though she'd only made this blunder because Auntie Liu egged her on.

"What's done is done," Lu Qiaosong said. "What's the point of castigating Mother now? If you've got the energy to do that, you might as well use it to think up ways to regain our control over the residence's affairs. Three hundred taels of silver a month is far from enough!"

"I have an idea," Lu Niantao said after some thought. "Perhaps we can give it a try."

"What is it?" Lady Liang quickly asked.

Lu Niantao said slowly, "Let's tell Physician Chang to keep treating Younger Brother."

***

In the bedroom in Lanfeng Pavilion, Lin Qingyu was writing a prescription. Lu Wancheng, about to fall asleep, opened his eyes; he wanted to look once again at the beauty before drifting off.

"What are you writing?" he asked.

"A prescription."

"Hm? Will you be giving me new medicine?" Lu Wancheng asked groggily. "What is it this time?"

Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes. "An aphrodisiac."

"What?" Lu Wancheng was shocked.

Lin Qingyu sneered. "Your brother claims that I slandered him because you couldn't satisfy me."

"Come again?"

Just then, Hualu arrived to deliver a message, interrupting Lu Wancheng's confusion. She said that a physician surnamed Chang was there to meet the young lord, and that he was currently waiting in the yard.

"That's my shidi," Lin Qingyu said. "I'll go out to meet him. You can take your nap."

Lu Wancheng replied slowly, "Oh. All right."

He closed his eyes again, but now he was strangely alert. Hualu tiptoed to his bedside to tuck in his blankets only to suddenly hear, "Hualu."

That gave her a shock. "Young Master? You're not asleep yet?" At this hour, Lu Wancheng was usually so soundly asleep that it was "as if he'd passed out"—to quote the young lord.

Lu Wancheng sat up and hugged his pillow. "When did you give me a green pillow?" he asked. "It makes me feel like there's a ton of green around my head."[16]

"What color pillow would you like, Young Master? I'll change it now."

Lu Wancheng looked out the window contemplatively. "Let me think about it."

***

Lin Qingyu met Chang Yang in the front hall. They'd become their mentor's disciples in the same year, so they were close compared to their fellow students. Lin Qingyu was looking at the young man in front of him for the first time in two years; Chang Yang had grown visibly taller and tanner. Thinking about his current situation, which was a far cry from his past, Lin Qingyu couldn't help feeling a bit wistful.

"You're taller, Shidi…" Lin Qingyu paused as the moniker "Tall-shidi" popped into his head, courtesy of a certain person. He suddenly couldn't continue his sentence; he even felt like laughing. Lu Wancheng wasn't really one for proper business, but he'd certainly mastered getting into a person's head.

Chang Yang had no idea what had diverted Lin Qingyu's attention away from him. He stared at Lin Qingyu, emotions roiling in his chest. His shixiong was still the same as he remembered, with a frigid expression and slightly aloof voice. Although he was a man, his face could be described as beautiful, if cold. He'd remained the

same, but their circumstances had completely changed. Within a mere two years, Chang Yang's shixiong—who had always been in his heart—had become a sickly young marquess's male wife. How could Chang Yang not feel indignant? If he'd known that his shixiong would eventually wed a man, Chang Yang would've made a move early on. After all, what would the point have been of repressing his feelings all these years?

Lin Qingyu seemed much more collected than Chang Yang. "When did you arrive in the capital, Shidi?"

Feeling a wave of mixed emotions, Chang Yang replied, "At the end of last year, I bade goodbye to Shifu and returned to Lin'an to celebrate the new year with my parents. After that, I immediately headed to the capital. I went to the Lin residence to seek you out first, but your father told me that you'd already…"

"How is Shifu?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"He's still doing well, despite his age—he lives comfortably, distant from worldly affairs. But Shixiong, you…" Chang Yang lowered his voice, affection palpable in his gaze. "Shixiong, I know you were forced into this. You had to marry a man because of an imperial edict."

Lin Qingyu didn't want to talk about that with his shidi after such a long time apart. "That's enough."

Chang Yang continued as if he hadn't heard. "No one knows you better than I do, Shixiong. I know your ambitions. When I got wind of your current situation, I couldn't get any sleep for a few days."

Lin Qingyu frowned. "Shidi."

"I've already come up with a plan. I'll take you with me when I leave the marquess's residence, and we'll journey around the empire with each other, just like what we used to…"

Lin Qingyu was about to interrupt when another male voice interjected, "What are you talking about? May I join you? I'd like to listen too."

They looked toward the voice only to see Lu Wancheng, clad in fine clothes and conducting himself with a noble's regal elegance. "Shouldn't you introduce us, Qingyu?"

Lin Qingyu found this strange. How had Lu Wancheng gotten up from bed at this hour? "Shidi, this is the young marquess. Young Marquess, this is my shidi." A simple, clear introduction without so much as an extra syllable.

Chang Yang cupped one hand in the other and bowed slightly. "I hope you're well, Young Marquess."

Lu Wancheng didn't treat him like a stranger. Instead, he said with a smile, "Greetings, Shidi."

Something flashed in Chang Yang's gaze. Smiling back, he said, "Please don't misunderstand, Young Marquess." He gazed at Lin Qingyu's side profile. "I grew up with Shixiong, and we're like brothers—closer to each other than anyone else. It's been so long since we last met that we wound up having a lengthy chat before we knew it. Did we disturb you, Young Marquess?"

"Like brothers"? Ha, Lu Wancheng thought. *Do you think I've read so few stories that I don't know the high risks of being someone's shixiong? We've both seen enough—as if you could fool me.*

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Misunderstand? What is there to misunderstand? You mustn’t misunderstand and think that I’d misunderstand.”

Now that Lu Wancheng was here, Chang Yang couldn’t continue his previous conversation with Lin Qingyu. Instead he said, “By the way, Shixiong, when our shizun was traveling in the South Sea, he found an herb that’s miraculously effective against consumption.”

Lin Qingyu’s expression thawed slightly. “Tell me about it.”

When they began discussing medicine, Lu Wancheng no longer had any opportunities to interject. He was fine with that, though; he was the one who currently sat beside Lin Qingyu in the seats for the household’s masters, sipping tea. It was important, especially at such a time as this, to present himself as magnanimous and understanding.

After the two men finished conversing, Lu Wancheng enthusiastically invited Chang Yang to stay for dinner. Chang Yang had noticed that his presence didn’t affect Lu Wancheng in the slightest, in contrast to how awkward *he* was starting to feel there, so he declined Lu Wancheng’s repeated invitations, even though he couldn’t bear to part with his shixiong. It was unfortunate that he hadn’t gotten to explain his plan to Lin Qingyu, but this matter couldn’t be rushed. He could simply seek another opportunity.

Before departing, Chang Yang brought up Lu Qiaosong’s illness. The third young master was indeed suffering from a kidney deficiency, and Chang Yang had already written a prescription for it.

“Lu Niantao already knows that we were fellow students, so I’m afraid your efforts are in vain, Shidi,” Lin Qingyu said blandly.

The moment Chang Yang bade them goodbye, Lu Wancheng stopped acting like a young nobleman. He yawned and said, “I’m beat. I’m going to go get some sleep.”

“What did you have in mind when you forsook your afternoon nap?” Lin Qingyu asked. “Just coming out here and talking nonsense?”

“Well, I wanted to entertain your shidi with enthusiasm,” Lu Wancheng said with a smile.

Lin Qingyu didn’t get it. “Why?”

“It shows my benevolence as your legitimate spouse, Qingyu.” Lu Wancheng grinned shamelessly. “Doesn’t it set me apart from those random nobodies outside the manor?”

After a pause, Lin Qingyu said, “Not at all.”

Chapter 19

CHANG YANG BECAME a regular at the marquess of Nan'an's residence. Every three days, he headed to Qingdai Pavilion to take Lu Qiaosong's pulse and then to Lanfeng Pavilion for a short visit. He even brought Lin Qingyu gifts from time to time.

Naturally, Chang Yang was overjoyed to see his shixiong so often. Every time they met, however, Young Marquess Lu was always at Lin Qingyu's side, acting as if he and Chang Yang had developed a deep kinship. He seemed happier than Lin Qingyu to see Chang Yang, as if *he* were the shixiong. Chang Yang didn't even have the chance to speak privately to Lin Qingyu, let alone explain his plan.

Before visiting the marquess's residence today, Chang Yang had lined up for an hour in front of the capital's most popular pastry shop for two cases of plum-blossom cakes, his shixiong's favorite. The moment he stepped through the gates of Lanfeng Pavilion carrying the cases, he heard Lu Wancheng's hearty laughter amid a cacophony of chicken squawks.

"You're here again, Shidi? Your presence is enough; why bring gifts? Come on in."

Before Chang Yang got a proper look at the scene in the yard, a colorful blur whipped past his eyes. He froze; when he came back to his senses, a chicken feather drifted from the sky and happened to land right on his head. With that feather in his hair, he looked like a filial peasant selling himself by the road to pay for his father's funeral.

Chang Yang froze once again. "Young Marquess, you're…"

"Cockfighting," Lu Wancheng said with a smile.

Only now did Chang Yang get a proper look at what had flown past—a listless rooster with half its feathers gone. That flight had evidently been its final act; it collapsed on the floor, barely breathing. Its attacker—another rooster—stood proudly by Lu Wancheng's feet, tossing its head back with poise.

Looking at the chicken feathers all over the ground, Chang Yang couldn't help but feel bitter resentment. *Oh, heavens… Why did Shixiong—a man comparable to a god or immortal—need to marry this aristocratic wastrel with nothing going for him but his good looks?*

Lu Wancheng's frivolousness strengthened Chang Yang's resolve to save his shixiong from misery. "Greetings, Young Marquess. Where is my shixiong?"

"He said that I was making too much noise and went out for a walk. He should be back soon." Lu Wancheng looked at the door and smiled. "Hm? Just when we were talking about him!"

Lin Qingyu had taken Huantong along to the garden to bury several jars of herbs under a tree, and he now returned only to witness the hubbub in Lanfeng Pavilion. It made his eyes twitch.

It was his fault; the medicine he'd given Lu Wancheng had worked too well. The weather also grew warmer as the days passed, allowing Lu Wancheng to regain enough strength to have fun around Lanfeng Pavilion, turning it into a chaotic mess.

Lu Wancheng stepped forward, facing Lin Qingyu's icy gaze. "You came back at the perfect time," he said with a smile. "Our xiao-shidi is here."

After a pause, Chang Yang said, "Shixiong."

Lin Qingyu looked at the crown of Chang Yang's head. "Why did you put a chicken feather in your hair?"

Lu Wancheng looked sideways and rather unceremoniously burst out laughing.

Chang Yang felt more awkward than ever. He quickly plucked the feather out and said, still embarrassed, "I bought you two cases of plum-blossom cakes, Shixiong. You can have them later."

Lin Qingyu inclined his head. "Thank you."

"You came back too late, Qingyu." Lu Wancheng bent and picked up the big rooster that had won many victories. "You didn't get to see how courageous my little chick was in battle."

"I didn't want to," Lin Qingyu said coldly. "If you've had your fun, tell them to clean up the yard. Anyone would laugh at this horrible mess." From the corner of his eye, Lin Qingyu glanced at the rooster in Lu Wancheng's arms, then changed the topic. "Actually…that rooster looks familiar."

"Hm? You know it?" Lu Wancheng asked.

"I think so." Lin Qingyu pondered for a moment. "I think it did the bows with me in your stead on our wedding day."

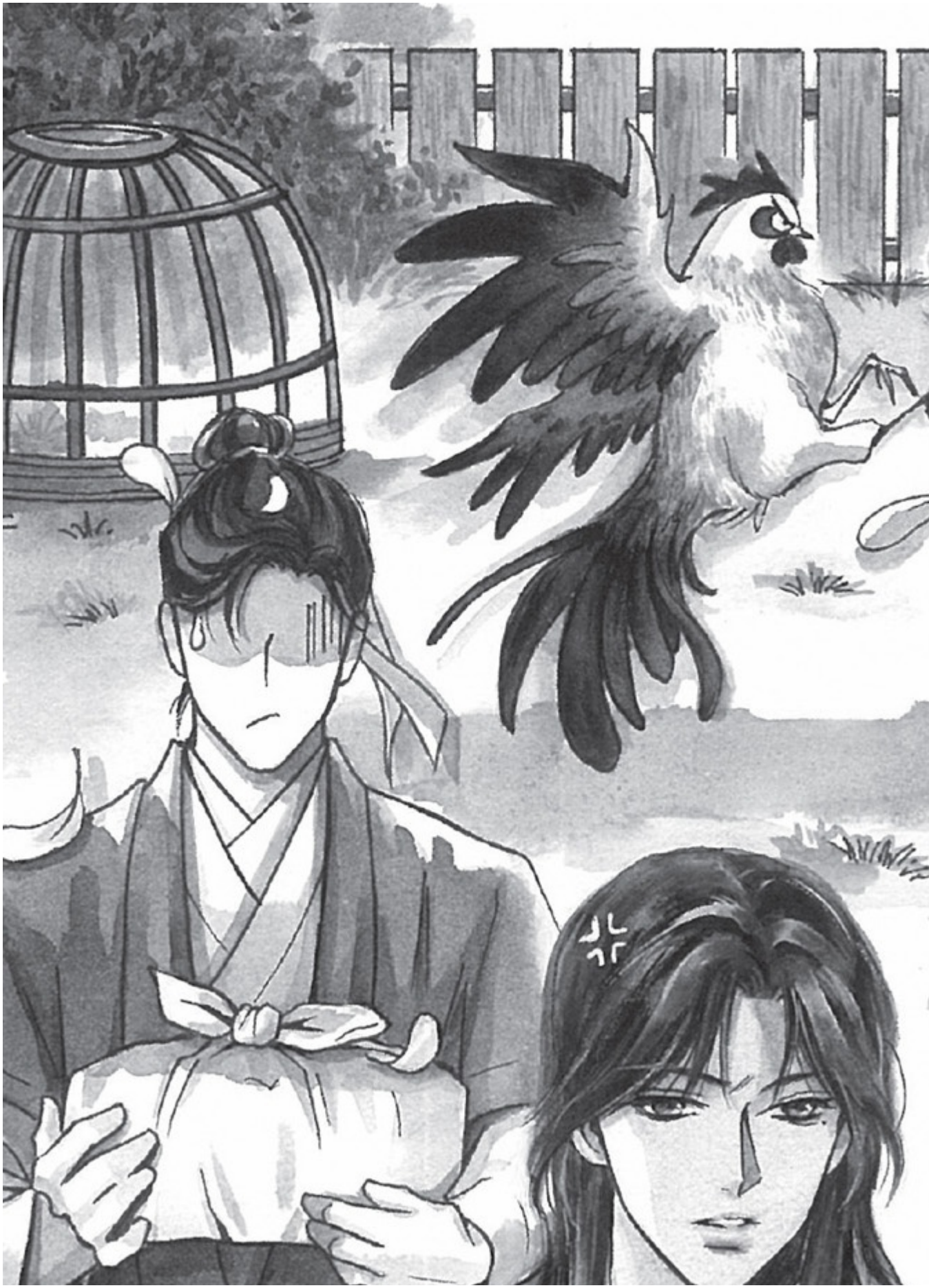
"You remember *that*?" Lu Wancheng sounded shocked.

"I remember everything my eyes see."

Speechless, Lu Wancheng looked down at the rooster in his arms, mixed emotions visible on his face. Chang Yang gazed at the rooster as well, his eyes unexpectedly containing a hint of…envy?

Lu Wancheng handed the rooster to Huantong. "Go ask around. I want to know whether it was this rooster that did the ceremony with Qingyu," he ordered.

As Chang Yang had expected, today was another occasion where the three of them remained gathered together, and he couldn't find a chance to speak with Lin Qingyu alone. Since Lin Qingyu wasn't allowed to be around a man from outside his family for too long, Chang Yang couldn't very well lengthen his visit. After a brief conversation, he was forced to say his goodbyes.



Under such time constraints, he couldn't tell his shixiong his plan, so he went for the next best alternative, which was to recount tales from when he and Lin Qingyu had traveled with their shifu. They'd rowed boats in a river in Jiangnan and walked around in the countryside of Shu, savoring authentic treats at local farms.

One winter, they were delayed after saving an injured hunter, which forced them to stay at a run-down temple. In the bitter end-of-year weather, faced with chill winds howling from the north, Chang Yang and Lin Qingyu—together with their shifu, another shixiong, and a servant boy—huddled around a fire for warmth. Shifu's heart had ached for them, so he'd removed his coat and covered them with it.

As Chang Yang told his stories, he kept observing Lu Wancheng's expression. Whatever he said, the young marquess always seemed interested. He kept asking enthusiastically, "What happened after that?" and "Really?" Or he'd lament, "Ah, they're human after all," or sigh, "Such is life."

Lin Qingyu had had enough. "How is Lu Qiaosong faring?" he interrupted Chang Yang.

Chang Yang answered, "Third Young Master is on the brink of recovery, but Second Young Lady said she wants him nursed back to full health, so she's instructed me to continue coming over every three days to take his pulse. Based on the results of that, I'll prescribe medicine for health and well-being."

Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng traded looks, both knowing what was on the other's mind despite not voicing it.

"It's getting late," Lin Qingyu said. "You should head back soon, Shidi."

Chang Yang was quite reluctant. "Then I'll visit you some other time, Shixiong."

After Chang Yang's departure, Lin Qingyu said, "Lu Niantao knows about my connection with Chang Yang, yet she's having him treat Lu Qiaosong regardless. I'm sure she's up to something."

Lu Wancheng opened a case of the sweets Chang Yang had brought. "She probably plans to use your shidi to her advantage."

While Lin Qingyu contemplated the courses of action Lu Niantao might take, a certain person brewed a pot of tea without a care in the world. Seeing that, Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes. "You're having a good time eating the pastries my shidi brought me."

"You shouldn't be so stingy, Qingyu." Lu Wancheng picked up a plum-blossom cake and took a small bite that he washed down with green tea. A smile slowly widened on his face. "I used to share whatever treats I received with my friends—those given by men and women alike. Good friends share good things with each other."

"And who were those men and women?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Lu Wancheng raised an eyebrow. "Hunh. So, *you* can have peers, but not me?"

Lin Qingyu got straight to the point. "You were raised in solitude from childhood, with tutors who taught you reading and calligraphy at home. So you wouldn't have had peers. Even if you did, you wouldn't have had *female* peers."

Lu Wancheng's expression dimmed. He was quiet for a while before saying slowly, "You seem to have a lot of questions for me, Physician Lin."

“I haven’t questioned you about anything,” Lin Qingyu said calmly. “And I’m not asking you to tell me anything either, Young Marquess.”

Lu Wancheng propped his chin on his hands. “You can ask. Perhaps I’ll answer your questions truthfully.” It was hard to discern from his tone whether he was sincere.

Lin Qingyu paused. “I’ll do without asking. I’m not interested.”

Rather than subjecting Lu Wancheng to a persistent interrogation from his end, Lin Qingyu would rather the young marquess reveal things of his own volition. Even if Lin Qingyu did ask him questions, there was no guarantee that Lu Wancheng would tell him the truth.

Lu Wancheng watched Lin Qingyu for a while before smiling and changing the topic. “Shall we have dinner together today, Qingyu? I had the kitchens cook the rooster.”

Lin Qingyu went with the change of topic, asking casually, “Which one?”

“The one that completed the wedding ceremony with you.”

Lin Qingyu found that strange. “How did it offend you?”

Lu Wancheng blinked. “The sight of it just annoyed me.”

Lin Qingyu sneered. “You killed it the moment it was of no use to you. If you’re so capable, why didn’t you get up and complete the ceremony with me that day?”

Lu Wancheng was momentarily lost for words. “That was my fault?”

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Three days later, Chang Yang visited the marquess’s residence to take Lu Qiaosong’s pulse as usual. Lu Qiaosong seemed short of patience; he kept rushing the process and left hastily afterward, not even asking Chang Yang for the results.

“Younger Brother probably has something urgent to attend to,” Lu Niantao said. “I apologize for his lack of decorum, Physician Chang.”

Chang Yang replied, “Don’t worry about it, Second Young Lady. Third Young Master is physically well now. He can resume his usual schedule.”

Lu Niantao nodded, smiling. “That’s all thanks to your hard work, Physician Chang. If he’s well, we won’t trouble you with visiting here every three days from now on.”

Chang Yang paused for a moment before saying dispiritedly, “I’ll take my leave now, then.”

After Chang Yang left, Lu Niantao called her most trusted servant girl over and gave her an order. “Follow Physician Chang, but make sure he doesn’t notice you tailing him. If something out of the ordinary happens, report back to me immediately.”

Entering the residence of a family as noble as the marquess of Nan’an’s wasn’t easy. Chang Yang knew very well that this might be his last chance. If he missed it, who knew how long he’d have to wait for another one? After going back and forth,

Chang Yang made his decision and wrote something on a slip of paper using the brush he always carried with him. As he worried over how he could deliver the note to Lin Qingyu, he saw Huantong walking toward the yard carrying two earthenware jars of medicine. Chang Yang stopped him without hesitation.

Lin Qingyu used to take Huantong with him while he traveled, so Chang Yang knew the servant quite well. Huantong tucked away the slip of paper Chang Yang handed him, saying, “Don’t worry, Chang-gongzi. I’ll be sure to deliver it.”

“You must ensure that no one else learns about this, especially not the young marquess,” Chang Yang reminded him.

Despite seeming hesitant, Huantong acquiesced. “Uh…sure.”

When Huantong returned to Lanfeng Pavilion, Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng were sitting by the window; they were in the middle of a game of weiqi. Lu Wancheng had already lost seven games in a row, and Lin Qingyu mocked him, saying that even a chicken could play better than that.

Lu Wancheng pressed a piece onto the board. “I merely studied how to play for a short while when I was a child. This was already a decent game, as far as I’m concerned.”

“How humble of you,” Lin Qingyu sneered.

It would be some time before the game ended, but Chang Yang was in a rush, so Huantong leaned down and whispered in Lin Qingyu’s ear, “Young Master, I have something to tell you.”

Lin Qingyu frowned and drew back. “You can just say it.”

Huantong gave Lu Wancheng a look and started reluctantly, “But…”

“Say it.” Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng had long since been forced into the same boat. There was nothing—nothing that happened in the marquess’s residence—Lin Qingyu couldn’t discuss in front of Lu Wancheng.

Once his young master had given that order, Huantong said loudly, “Chang-gongzi told me to deliver something to my young master, and to make sure that the young marquess didn’t notice!”

Lin Qingyu was lost for words.

Lu Wancheng tossed a piece onto the board. “All right,” he drawled. “I’m a bit angry now.”

If Chang Yang had tried making advances in front of him, he would’ve found it entertaining, but such underhanded, secretive tricks were seriously out of line.

“What is it?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Huantong took out the slip of paper, and Lin Qingyu unfolded it in front of Lu Wancheng. On it was nothing but five words: *Meet me in the backyard.*

“‘The moon shines from above the willow tree; two lovers promise to meet as the sun sets,”[17] Lu Wancheng recited sarcastically. “Will Physician Lin meet his xiao-shidi there? I want to know! I’m on the edge of my seat!”

Lin Qingyu could guess why Chang Yang had asked him to meet in private—so that they could leave the marquess’s residence together. After some thought, he said, “I’m sure Lu Niantao and the others know all about everything Shidi has said and done in the residence. I think I know now what her intentions are.”

“You didn’t know until now? Ha.” Lu Wancheng laughed curtly. “Even a blind man could see that Xiao-Shidi is enamored with you, so of course someone else would want to use that to their advantage.”

“Can you stop with the attitude?” Lin Qingyu snapped.

Lu Wancheng’s voice rose. “No! He’s going to take my wife away from me, and you want me to be fucking civil?”

“Aren’t we merely sworn brothers? Good friends who share meals? Where does this claim that he’s trying to take your wife come from?”

That rendered Lu Wancheng speechless. He calmed, and only then did he realize that—shockingly—Lin Qingyu had a point. *Right!* How could his good friend, his sworn brother, make him a cuckold? As long as he saw his wife as a good friend, he’d never be cuckolded.

Lu Wancheng reclined on his chair again, saying idly, “You’re right. Pretend I didn’t say anything.”

Lin Qingyu scoffed. “Respond to Chang Yang’s message,” he told Huantong. “Tell him to leave the residence and never come back.”

“Wait.” Lu Wancheng’s gaze darkened as if he were plotting something. Lin Qingyu watched a mischievous grin suddenly appear across his face. “My good friend,” he said, “I think you should meet your shidi after all.”

Lin Qingyu raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

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A short while later, Huantong and Hualu left Lanfeng Pavilion. One headed over to meet Chang Yang, who’d been waiting a long time, while the other went to Mianyue Pavilion.

Finding Chang Yang, Huantong told him that Lin Qingyu had already read his note. However, various people came and went from the marquess’s residence during the day, so it wasn’t a good time to meet. If Chang Yang could wait in the residence for two more hours, he could meet Lin Qingyu after the sky darkened.

Obviously, Chang Yang had no objections to this, so Huantong led him to an uninhabited structure that was part of a side wing of the residence. “Please wait here, Chang-gongzi. Young Master will come when the time is right.”

Chang Yang waited from dusk to nightfall. Huantong even delivered a meal to him midway through.

The summer equinox had passed not long ago, and it was getting hotter by the day. After nightfall, the remaining heat gradually dissipated, and a cool breeze blew by from time to time. If only Chang Yang could view the yard’s moonlit lotus blossoms and listen to the frogs with a beautiful man by his side… Only then would this beautiful night and its scenery not go to waste.

Unfortunately, the two beautiful men in Lanfeng Pavilion -certainly wouldn’t be in the mood for such leisurely pleasures tonight.

Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng’s wheelchair until they’d left Lanfeng Pavilion. Then he entrusted the wheelchair to Hualu. “I’ll take my leave.”

Lu Wancheng nodded. “Go.”

The young marquess watched Lin Qingyu walk away. As his eyes followed the aloof silhouette bathed in moonlight, he felt somewhat uncomfortable. He attributed the feeling to the possessiveness men tended to experience—if he reined it in a bit, he’d be fine. It felt like when someone had borrowed his favorite toys when he was a child. The toys had constantly been on his mind; he’d fretted that they would get dirty.

Wait. Would the simpleminded xiao-shidi confess grandly to Lin Qingyu on the spur of the moment, then crowd Lin Qingyu against the wall, grab his waist, and force a kiss on him?

He wouldn’t, would he…? Fuck.

As Lu Wancheng’s mind wandered, Hualu asked, “Eldest Young Master, where are we going?”

Knowing that he should focus, Lu Wancheng stopped letting his imagination run wild. “The backyard,” he said.

While the moon still shone brightly in the night sky, Lin Qingyu passed through the backyard to arrive at the building where Chang Yang waited. He knocked lightly on the door three times, and it was opened from within.

“Shixiong!” Chang Yang called excitedly.

“We’ll talk indoors,” Lin Qingyu said in a low voice.

Inside the house, only an oil lamp the servants used was lit, and it only illuminated a small area around them. Chang Yang stared unabashedly at the man across from him. Under the faint light, flickering flames danced in his shixiong’s eyes. Gazing into them for some time, he felt his breath turn hot, almost fevered.

Before his staring had satisfied him, Lin Qingyu urged him to get to the point. “Go on.”

Looking at his shixiong’s slightly parted lips, Chang Yang lost his train of thought for a moment. Then he mustered his courage, saying in one breath, “Leave this place with me, Shixiong!”

As I expected. Lin Qingyu sighed softly, then calmly asked, “Where do you want to take me?”

“Anywhere, as long as we’re away from the marquess’s residence and the capital!” Chang Yang’s eyes shone with high hopes. “We can go to Shifu and live with him, secluded in the mountains. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Lin Qingyu massaged the spot between his eyebrows. “My marriage with Lu Wancheng was ordained by His Majesty. If I leave without a care, what will happen to my family?”

“I considered that as well,” said Chang Yang. “Shixiong, do you remember how Shifu was always trying to make a pill that could induce the appearance of death?”

That finally piqued Lin Qingyu’s interest a bit. Back when he was traveling with his shifu, they had come across a young woman who’d hanged herself from a tree. After they saved her, she told them—between sobs—about what she’d been through. Her gambling-addict father had sold her to a local nobleman as a concubine, and she’d been subject to horrible beatings and humiliation every day since. The

nobleman had also told her that he'd make her family pay with their lives if she ever ran away. Left with no choice, she could only resort to taking her life.

From that day on, their shifu had wanted to make such a pill.

"Has Shifu succeeded?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Chang Yang nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. He named it too. It's called the Departure Pill. He also passed along the formula to me. Unfortunately, even though I have that recipe, I'm not skilled enough to make the pill—but I know you could, Shixiong."

"So you want me to detach from this situation by feigning death?"

"Yes. As long as everyone thinks you're dead, they won't cause your family any trouble."

"Good point," Lin Qingyu said calmly. "But what would the value of being a dead man be?"

Chang Yang answered without a moment's hesitation. "If you regain your freedom, you can do anything you want. Isn't that enough?"

"Anything I want… Ha!" Lin Qingyu scoffed, as if he found Chang Yang's naivety amusing. "You said you knew me, didn't you? Yet you don't have any idea what I truly want! I don't want to be an ordinary physician. If I am to be a physician, I must be the best there is. I must peruse all the medical books in the world and have a never-ending supply of rare, precious herbs at my disposal. Only the Imperial Academy of Medicine could let me do that. I'm not averse to opulence and wealth, nor to power and influence. I enjoy the sight of people kneeling in front of me and trembling in fear. Did you know all that?"

Chang Yang stared at Lin Qingyu, dumbfounded, as if his shixiong were a stranger.

"You know nothing, yet you speak of taking me with you. Isn't that utterly laughable?" Lin Qingyu stood. "I'll have Huantong show you out of the residence."

Lin Qingyu's response had completely defied Chang Yang's expectations. He'd thought of his shixiong as a righteous man who had great virtue and an open heart. Wealth and power seemed incongruous with Lin Qingyu. Chang Yang had yet to come to terms with everything, but when his shixiong was about to leave, he couldn't help voicing his thoughts. "Can Young Marquess Lu give you all those things you want, then, Shixiong?"

Lin Qingyu froze in his tracks.

"Young Marquess Lu doesn't have much longer to live," Chang Yang continued. "He whiles his time away aimlessly, waiting for death to befall him. How is he different from the other insouciant sons of wealthy families? Given his lack of virtue, how can he possibly—"

"How do you expect him to act, then?" Lin Qingyu interrupted icily.

Chang Yang was stunned. "Shixiong?"

"You know very well that Lu Wancheng is afflicted with a terminal illness and is near his last breath. You saw him chat jovially with you, seemingly without a care—but do you know how much medicine he has to take, or how many needles are jabbed into his skin daily?" Lin Qingyu asked. "He has to catch his breath after walking short distances, and a slight cold can put him into a deep, comatose sleep that

he might or might not wake up from. When he suffers a coughing fit, he doesn't sleep well for the entire night—still, he stifles his coughs because he worries that he'll wake me up. What do you expect someone like him to do? Take the imperial exams? Join the army and serve the country? He only has six months left; why can't he live a carefree life as a wealthy family's son in those last six months?"

Lin Qingyu rarely spoke so much. Of course, he recognized Lu Wancheng's laziness, insouciance, and frivolousness. He, too, disliked how Lu Wancheng didn't give a damn about anything; he'd taunted the other man quite a fair amount over it. However, that didn't mean that others could look down on Lu Wancheng.

After a drawn-out silence, Chang Yang asked in a low voice, "Shixiong, do you…have feelings for him?"

"I have no particular attraction to men," Lin Qingyu answered without hesitation. "Neither does he. If I have to define what he and I are…" Lin Qingyu chuckled lightly. "Perhaps I can say that we're kindred spirits who were forcibly bound to each other through marriage."

"No particular attraction to men," Chang Yang repeated with a bitter smile. "I get it. It's me who… I troubled you, Shixiong."

You aren't important enough to trouble me yet, Lin Qingyu wanted to say, but upon seeing Chang Yang's despondent face, he wound up swallowing his words.

Chang Yang took a deep breath before taking a sheet of paper from his medical kit. Forcing a smile, he said, "This is the formula for the Departure Pill. Please take it, Shixiong. I…I'll take my leave."

Lin Qingyu nodded slightly. "Huantong, show our guest out."

As Chang Yang went outside, he looked up at the moon shining brightly in the sky and heaved a long sigh. He'd only embarked on this long journey to the capital for his shixiong's sake. Since the person he'd faced was no longer the man he'd fallen for, it was probably time for him to leave.

No—Shixiong had *never* been the man in his imagination. Rather, he'd forcibly impressed his own desires on his mental image of Shixiong. Shixiong was right—it was utterly laughable of him.

As Chang Yang stewed in his despair, Huantong said, "Cheer up, Chang-gongzi. Someone like my young master would never let himself be confined in this horrible marquess's residence for long."

Chang Yang chuckled self-deprecatingly. "I thought too highly of myself."

Huantong patted Chang Yang's shoulder. "Let's go, Chang-gongzi. If we dally any longer, we'll miss it."

"Miss what?" Chang Yang asked.

Huantong laughed. "The young marquess knew that you'd probably end up feeling sad tonight, so he invited you to a show for entertainment."

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The night gradually darkened. A shadowy cloud silently blocked the moonlight, and one after another, the manor's lamps flickered out. Unless one had a

lantern in hand, the paths under the resplendent canopy of trees in the backyard were utterly dark.

Lu Qiaosong and Auntie Qiu hid behind one tree, staring at two silhouettes beside the pond.

"Are you sure it's them?" Lu Qiaosong asked.

"Certainly," said Auntie Qiu. "Physician Chang was wearing clothes of that color today. The young lord was wearing white too."

"Go!" Lu Qiaosong snarled. "We can't let them run away!"

Auntie Qiu dashed out from behind the trees. She was incompetent at most things, but she did have a loud voice; if she cried out at the top of her lungs, half the residence could hear her. "Oh my! Isn't this the young lord? Who are you viewing the moon with on the sly in the middle of the night, instead of waiting at the foot of the sickly young marquess's bed?"

Her booming voice came unexpectedly. The man in white slipped, startled, and almost fell into the water. Thankfully, the man beside him, who wore blue, quickly helped him steady himself.

"Who's talking nonsense over there?" the man in blue barked sternly.

When Auntie Qiu heard that voice, her legs buckled.

How could that be the marquess? Stumbling, Auntie Qiu tried to run back to where she'd rushed out from, but Hualu's sudden appearance stopped her.

"Why the rush, Auntie Qiu?" Hualu asked loudly before peeking behind the trees. "Oh—Third Young Master is here too. Eldest Young Master and Master are viewing the moon over there. Don't you want to have a look at it as well?"

That suggestion forced Lu Qiaosong to stop in the middle of his attempt to sneak away. He cursed internally.

Hualu's voice wasn't as piercing as Auntie Qiu's; still, the marquess already heard her.

The marquess was staying in Mianyue Pavilion that night, as usual. Lady Pan had waited on him as he changed into his casual clothes. Then, seeing the moon shining brightly outside, she'd told him that the lotuses in the pond were blooming nicely as well, and she'd asked whether he wanted to take a walk by the pond and enjoy the moon.

The marquess, a scholar who appreciated the moonlight, couldn't bear to let the picturesque evening go to waste, so he'd headed to the backyard with Lady Pan—only to bump into his eldest son, who'd also come to enjoy the moon. Father and son couldn't often chat with each other; thus, Lady Pan—in a considerate gesture—excused herself by saying that she had to prepare food, then left them alone.

Unprompted, Lu Wancheng asked about the emperor's wife. The empress, who was constantly concerned about her sister's only child, often sent eunuchs over to see how he was doing and provide him with nourishing foods and herbs. The marquess told Lu Wancheng to visit the palace and thank the empress personally, since his health had improved.

Abruptly, someone had yelled in the distance, giving Lu Wancheng such a shock that he almost fell into the water. The marquess knew that his eldest son was frail and thus couldn't handle sudden frights well; indeed, the slightest misstep could

leave him bedridden for life. Noticing how sickly pale Lu Wancheng looked after stumbling—even his lips were bloodless—the marquess boomed in rage, “Who’s talking nonsense over there? Get over here!”

The polite Hualu then forced Lu Qiaosong and Auntie Liu to head over.

“What are you two trying to do, making such a racket in the backyard at night?” the marquess snapped.

“I’m here to enjoy the moon as well, Father,” Lu Qiaosong said, bracing himself.

Lu Wancheng smiled weakly. “And rather than any of the courtesans in your pavilion, you brought Auntie Qiu instead. You must really be in the mood.”

Lu Qiaosong knew that he was in the wrong, so he could only endure the sardonic remark.

The marquess looked at Auntie Qiu. “What were you yelling about just now?”

Auntie Qiu answered rapidly, “While keeping the third young master company as he enjoyed the moon, Marquess, I saw two people by the pond from afar. I thought they were the young lord and Physician Chang. I can’t be blamed for my mistake. Everyone in the household knows that they once studied medicine under the same mentor and have a close relationship—they see each other often. That’s why I mistook you for them.”

Sternly, the marquess asked, “Is this true?”

“Physician Chang visits Lanfeng Pavilion to meet me, not Qingyu,” Lu Wancheng replied calmly. “The first time we met, Physician Chang and I became fast friends, and we always have pleasant conversations together. It was I who asked him to visit Lanfeng Pavilion often to relieve me of my boredom.”

Hualu added, “That’s right. Whenever Physician Chang comes to Lanfeng Pavilion, it’s to chat with Eldest Young Master. Sometimes the young lord isn’t even present.”

The marquess relaxed somewhat. “Who *is* this Physician Chang?”

“He’s been here to treat Third Younger Brother’s kidney deficiency,” Lu Wancheng replied evenly.

“Kidney…” The marquess jabbed his finger at Lu Qiaosong’s nose. “Explain!” he growled.

He’d known that Lu Qiaosong had fallen sick, but not with what. And given Lu Qiaosong’s past behavior, of course anyone would connect a kidney deficiency to his sexual escapades.

Lu Qiaosong flushed crimson, but he couldn’t lose his temper while face-to-face with the marquess. “You misunderstand, Father. I was merely afflicted with a slight cold…”

The marquess didn’t believe him, naturally. Still, he couldn’t very well interrogate his son about such an indecent matter in front of the servants. “Come with me to the study,” he ordered, then turned to leave, enraged.

“Father!” Lu Qiaosong exclaimed.

Lu Niantao had painstakingly reminded him beforehand to drive home Lin Qingyu and Chang Yang’s relationship, whatever the other parties said or did. Even if

that relationship wasn't real, Lu Qiaosong still needed to arouse suspicion. Little had he known Lu Wancheng would turn the tables on him!

Lu Qiaosong would undoubtedly be subject to a nasty scolding, and he wanted to ensure that Lu Wancheng suffered as well.

Lu Qiaosong stumbled over to stand in front of Lu Wancheng, grinning fiercely. "A man as beautiful as Sister-in-Law must've captured many hearts. You've turned a blind eye to that this time, Eldest Brother, but will you still be able to do so next time? However magnanimous you may be, I don't think you like that your wife is secretly admired by many, do you?"

"So you *do* know that he's my wife, Third Younger Brother. Since he's mine, let me make a request of everyone…" Lu Wancheng smiled as his eyes flitted past the group's faces. Then he gazed vaguely toward Chang Yang, and his tone changed abruptly, his words cloaking a knife's lethal edge: "Don't you dare lay a finger on him. Don't even *dream* of it."

Chapter 20

As soon as he and Chang Yang went their separate ways, Lin Qingyu returned to Lanfeng Pavilion. It was Hualu who told him what transpired in the backyard. A while later, Mianyue Pavilion also delivered a message that the marquess had interrogated Lu Qiaosong overnight.

At first, Lu Qiaosong refused to admit to anything. The marquess then called over the servant boy who was always with Lu Qiaosong and questioned him as well, only to discover that for the past month, Lu Qiaosong had spent most of his nights with prostitutes.

Exposed, Lu Qiaosong claimed that he'd only sought the services of women who sold their skills, not their bodies. He said he'd merely done things like recite poetry, savor wine, or enjoy qin music—he'd never crossed the line with them.

Hearing the word "them," however, absolutely infuriated the marquess. He slapped Lu Qiaosong across the face and ordered him to reflect on his wrongdoings in the ancestral hall for one day as punishment. In addition, he'd be sequestered for a month. The marquess also vented his fury on Lady Liang, reproaching her for failing to properly parent her son. How could she possibly manage the marquess's vast residence when she couldn't even wrangle her son?

"That's all?" Lin Qingyu asked. "Was there anything else?"

Huantong shook his head. "No."

Lin Qingyu sneered. "They're always either forced to reflect or sequestered—how boring."

"Young Lord! Young Lord!" Hualu rushed from the bedroom. "Young Master seems ill again!"

It was now the peak of summer. Lu Wancheng, wanting to cool himself, had devoured a few red grapes soaked in well water. Half a day later, he'd developed a fever. It was low, thankfully, so he was still conscious—albeit shockingly pale.

Lin Qingyu took his pulse, then asked, "Were those grapes good?"

Lu Wancheng was nestled in his blankets, and his gaze held a hint of resentment. "They were. So I couldn't help it."

Lin Qingyu's eyes narrowed.

"Don't be mad." Lu Wancheng tugged Lin Qingyu's sleeve with all the strength he had left. "I know I screwed up—" He coughed.

Lin Qingyu looked down at Lu Wancheng's bony hand, and the trace of annoyance that was left in him dissipated. "Next time you eat anything you shouldn't, I'll stop caring for you."

Lu Wancheng chuckled, sounding tired. "What a terrifying threat. I'm so scared."

Lin Qingyu didn't bother arguing with the sick man. He sat at the table and wrote a prescription for Lu Wancheng.

In bed, Lu Wancheng sighed. “Why do I fall sick every time I try to be intimidating? Is it the heavens’ way of telling me that I’m only fit to lie about?”

“No,” Lin Qingyu refuted him mercilessly. “The heavens are telling you not to eat anything cold.”

Lu Wancheng’s bout of sickness brought a period of peace to Lanfeng Pavilion.

One day, Lady Pan came over to visit the sick young marquess. Lu Wancheng had just taken his medicine and begun to rest, so he wasn’t in a position to welcome any guests. Lin Qingyu had Lady Pan stay in the front hall for some tea, where they ended up discussing some of the household’s general affairs.

Lu Qiaosong had been supporting quite a few courtesans so that they could entertain him whenever he pleased. Once he was sequestered, and thus couldn’t leave the residence to indulge himself, he had no choice but to seek pleasure in those women.

Embarrassingly, however, Qingdai Pavilion had long since spent more than it could afford, and despite the songs they sang and the tunes they played, the women weren’t paid a single tael. Several had heard that Lady Pan and Lin Qingyu now managed the residence’s affairs, so they sought Lady Pan and asked for their monthly allowances.

“The household has never paid courtesans a monthly allowance,” Lady Pan told Lin Qingyu helplessly. “They made ends meet through Third Young Master’s rewards. But now that he’s short on funds too, where would he get extra money to reward them?”

“Why didn’t they come to me?” Lin Qingyu casually asked.

Lady Pan’s servant girl pouted. “As if they’d dare. They only made a scene in Mianyue Pavilion because they found Concubine Pan more approachable.”

Lin Qingyu contemplated that in silence. Lady Pan said nothing, afraid to disturb him. After a while, Lin Qingyu asked, “If we don’t pay them, what’ll happen?”

“Qingdai Pavilion can’t provide for so many people, so they could only be sent away.”

“But if we send them away, who else could entertain Third Younger Brother?” Lin Qingyu smiled calmly—almost benevolently, even. “If he likes them, then I—his sister-in-law—should make him happy, shouldn’t I?”

Lady Pan couldn’t be sure about Lin Qingyu’s perspective on the matter. She ventured tentatively, “Young Lord, do you intend to—”

“Tell them that the marquess’s household doesn’t support anyone who can’t be of use. Qingdai Pavilion’s monthly expenses have far surpassed the allowance it was given, and the marquess just threw a fit over Third Younger Brother’s kidney deficiency. In short, the household can no longer provide for them all. At most, only…half can stay. They themselves can decide whether they wish to remain.”

Lady Pan dared not think too deeply about this decision; in a low voice, she agreed.

The courtesans Qingdai Pavilion supported were mostly orphaned women. Since they’d finally found a generous patron who allowed them to live comfortably in the marquess’s residence, which of them would want to leave if she wasn’t forced to?

Despite Lu Qiaosong's licentiousness, he was quite picky and didn't take just anyone in. Most of the time, he just listened to the courtesans play music, or had them attend to him and his guests; those things made him look good. He only chose one to sleep with on occasion, which was why the marquess and marchioness could tolerate them in the residence.

Since the women were Lu Qiaosong's courtesans, they relied solely on his favor. Now that half would be sent away, they were forced to vie against each other for his affections.

The next day, Lin Qingyu asked Huantong to dig out the jars of herbs buried under the tree. Those herbs were to be laid under the sun to dry for three days, then ground into powder and placed in an incense burner to be delivered to Zhang Shiquan. That incense had a rich fragrance that only dissipated after a long time. When Lin Qingyu finished making the incense, he went for a bath, changed into fresh garments, and returned to his room.

Lu Wancheng was reading in bed. His infirmity wasn't quite as serious this time, but it still took a toll on him. He didn't show any sign of recovery, but his condition hadn't worsened either. After a mere few days of this tepid affliction, his vitality—the result of the previous month's nourishment and rest—was almost drained. His lips and face were pale and devoid of rosiness; only his mirthful eyes remained unaffected.

Every day, before Lu Wancheng went to sleep, Lin Qingyu took his pulse. Today was no exception. When Lu Wancheng caught a fleeting whiff of fragrance on Lin Qingyu, he asked, "Have you been working with something aromatic?"

Lin Qingyu retracted his hand. "No."

"You have." Lu Wancheng leaned closer, his nose twitching slightly. "What is it? It smells really nice."

Lin Qingyu frowned and pushed him away. "It's not something you should breathe in."

Lu Wancheng chuckled in understanding. "Got it. It's poisonous."

Lin Qingyu hesitated momentarily, but he didn't deny it.

"Now, here's a problem. Who do you plan to use it on? It must be someone who slighted you recently." Lu Wancheng coughed twice. "Lu Qiaosong?"

Lin Qingyu didn't reply to that either.

Lu Wancheng continued, "You wrote a prescription a while ago, and when I asked what it was for, you said it was an aphrodisiac. You didn't lie to me, I gather. I recall that the household's courtesans can't leave the premises without permission—so, if they need to buy anything from outside the residence, they enlist the help of a servant boy they know well."

Lin Qingyu still said nothing.

"In conclusion, you want Lu Qiaosong to die a most humiliating death—atop a woman, in the middle of coitus—just because he humiliated you."

Lin Qingyu gulped. Looking forward, he said calmly, "Yes. So? You think he shouldn't die? That I'm being excessively cruel?"

Lu Wancheng chuckled. "Maybe…just a bit?" he said deliberately.

“Ha. You can think whatever about it,” Lin Qingyu retorted, his composure intact. “Lu Qiaosong’s mortifying words about how you couldn’t satisfy me humiliated you as well. And he also wanted to ruin my reputation through Chang Yang. Even if his wrongdoings don’t warrant death, I’ll still feel joy when he dies, so I’m arranging it. I want to make myself happy. It’s that simple.”

This side of Lin Qingyu belied his appearance, and he’d never shown it to anyone else. His parents were gentle and kindhearted; they’d never done anything to harm anyone else, even if it would’ve benefited them. Before marrying, Lin Qingyu had spent his time either with his parents or his mentor and fellow students, reading books by sages and wise men, which had made suppressing his darker side easy. After marrying into the marquess of Nan’an’s family, however, the malice he couldn’t reveal to anyone spilled out uncontrollably, like water surging from a broken dam. It was fortunate that he remained rational; he knew that acting carelessly in his situation would lead to his death.

He’d been in that state until Lu Wancheng said that he liked it when Lin Qingyu did bad things. The young marquess even encouraged him and abetted him in his wrongdoings. It was Lu Wancheng who’d let him run wild, leading him to this point. What right did he have to accuse Lin Qingyu of being excessively cruel?

Lu Wancheng said nothing. He merely watched Lin Qingyu in silence.

Annoyance surged within Lin Qingyu. He shut his eyes, saying, “If he follows his physician’s orders and refrains from touching any of those women, he may not die.”

Finally, Lu Wancheng let out a chuckle. “Qingyu, I expected nothing less from you…” he marveled softly.

Lu Wancheng’s words sounded like praise; he seemed excited, mesmerized. His slightly deep voice made something in Lin Qingyu’s chest relax.

Lu Wancheng continued, “But…”

Lin Qingyu’s face, which had cleared, darkened again. How dare Lu Wancheng have any buts?

“Next time you’re doing bad things, let me join in, all right?” Lu Wancheng requested with a smile.

Lin Qingyu’s eyes widened.

“I told you I enjoy it when you do them.”

As Lin Qingyu cast his gaze down, silent, his fluttering lashes seemed to convey what occupied his mind.

“All right, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu raised his head slowly, fixing his gaze on Lu Wancheng as he whispered, “All right.”

FROM THEN ON, Lu Wancheng started paying attention to developments at Qingdai Pavilion; he’d ask for updates daily. When Huantong came into the room today, he couldn’t even open his mouth before Lu Wancheng squealed, “Young Marquess! Young Lord! Something finally went wrong in Qingdai Pavilion!”

This display rendered Lin Qingyu speechless. Huantong, meanwhile, appeared confused. “What…?”

Lu Wancheng chuckled. “I figured you would say that. I was imitating you.”

“First of all, Huantong doesn’t call me Young Lord. If you want to imitate him, do it better,” Lin Qingyu said unceremoniously. “Next, if we want this aphrodisiac to seriously damage Lu Qiaosong’s health, that will take longer than just one day.” Lin Qingyu couldn’t help feeling suspicious. “Why are you more excited about this than I am?”

Lu Wancheng cleared his throat. “Recuperating is way too boring. I cough so much that I can’t even fall asleep.” Indeed, Lu Wancheng hadn’t slept well for a few days; dark circles lined his eyes.

After some thought, Lin Qingyu asked Huantong, “What are you here for?”

“Oh.” Watching their exchange, Huantong had almost forgotten the reason he came. “Steward Zhang is here.”

“Usher him in,” Lin Qingyu said.

During his visit, Zhang Shiquan told them about something strange.

Half of the household’s properties and businesses were restaurants and shops in the city; the other half consisted of countryside estates. The latter relied on the weather to sustain themselves—a drought or flood could lead to a long cropless period. Strangely, though, the income of the estates in Xu Prefecture had increased, although the area had been suffering from a drought since the beginning of the year. The estates’ accounts seemed fine on the surface, and they were, indeed, delivering grain reserves to the residence’s storerooms. This was absolutely befuddling.

Noticing the worry on Zhang Shiquan’s face, Huantong expressed confusion. “The harvest was more bountiful, not less so—isn’t that a good thing?”

“I just worry because it’s unclear where their silver has come from,” Zhang Shiquan said. “If it’s discovered that the silver was acquired unlawfully, that will implicate the entire household.”

Lin Qingyu glanced at Lu Wancheng from the corner of his eye. Lu Wancheng lay in bed, giving a leisurely impression despite his sickness. His eyes were half shut, as if what the others were discussing wasn’t any of his business.

“Should we have the matter investigated, Young Lord?” Zhang Shiquan asked.

Lin Qingyu had an idea, then changed his mind. “No need. The bottom line is that the amount of silver hasn’t decreased, so I can’t be bothered.”

Lu Wancheng’s eyes widened; Lin Qingyu practically saw his ears prick up, which he couldn’t help finding funny.

“I think that this matter should be treated cautiously, Young Lord,” Zhang Shiquan said, hesitating. “I suggest that it be investigated.”

“We’ll discuss that later.” Lin Qingyu rose. “I feel tired, so I’ll return to my room for a nap. You may do as you please.”

He left, leaving the worrywart steward and the lazy young marquess to look at each other in silence.

It was common knowledge that the young marquess was detached from worldly affairs, never concerning himself with family matters regardless of their

severity or importance. Stewards like Zhang Shiquan merely needed to follow the young lord's orders. So now that Lin Qingyu had said that he didn't want to investigate, Zhang Shiquan could only comply, despite disagreeing with the young lord's decision.

The steward sighed. "I'll take my leave, Young Marquess."

"Wait," Lu Wancheng commanded solemnly. "The issue in Xu Prefecture needs to be investigated, and by *you*. I suspect that…" Lu Wancheng paused. "This mustn't be delayed. You're to depart as soon as possible."

Ever since Zhang Shiquan had begun working in the marquess's residence, the young Lu Wancheng had only given him one order, which was to relieve the young lord's worries. Surprised that the young marquess was suddenly issuing orders, Zhang Shiquan said thoughtlessly, "But the young lord directed…"

"He's tired, so misjudgment was inevitable," Lu Wancheng said, then added reluctantly, "Fine… I'll worry about his inheritance once again."

Zhang Shiquan dared not dally; the next day, he left for the Xu Prefecture estates. After hearing about that, Lin Qingyu eyed Lu Wancheng with a delicate mixture of emotions.

What should be done? What shouldn't be done? What could and couldn't be done? Lu Wancheng saw all such possibilities more clearly than anyone else, yet he just couldn't be bothered to move; all he wanted was to lounge around. Only when no one was there to do the things that should be done did Lu Wancheng reluctantly force himself to do them.

Lu Wancheng had once said that he could be at the top of his class despite hating school. Lin Qingyu had assumed that he was spouting nonsense, but now…he believed that.

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The scorching summer heat was unbearable. After half a day in the bath chamber, Lin Qingyu's thin garments were all soaked in sweat; they clung to his skin uncomfortably. Lin Qingyu dipped his hand in the water, deemed the temperature suitable, and had Huantong push Lu Wancheng's wheelchair over.

Despite his laziness, Lu Wancheng took great care of his hygiene. So long as he was well enough, he bathed daily in the summer. Worried that the young marquess would catch cold, Lin Qingyu told him to bathe once every two days, but Lu Wancheng didn't like that and kicked up a fuss. Lin Qingyu found that annoying, so he allowed Lu Wancheng to bathe as he pleased. Thankfully, the marquess's residence was large enough to have servants who would attend to Lu Wancheng's well-being meticulously.

As Lin Qingyu poured a medicinal powder into the wooden bathtub, he heard noises from the door. "You're here," he said without looking back.

That surprised Lu Wancheng somewhat. "Why are you…"

"It's been a long time, yet you're continuing to cough. It disrupts me while I sleep. But if you soak in this medicinal bathwater before going to bed, you may recover." Lin Qingyu turned toward Lu Wancheng, tucking sweat-soaked tendrils of hair behind his ear.

In the bath chamber, illuminated by candlelight and full of mist, Lin Qingyu's face was rosy from the steam. Even his lips seemed to glisten with a watery sheen.

"Oh," Lu Wancheng said. He quietly directed his gaze elsewhere.

"Huantong, remove the young marquess's garments," Lin Qingyu ordered.

"Yes, Young Master," Huantong replied loudly.

Letting Huantong disrobe him, Lu Wancheng asked, "Are you staying to watch while I bathe, Qingyu?"

"No. The medicinal bathwater's temperature is crucial—if it's too high or low, that will compromise the treatment's effects. So I have to stay and look after it."

Lu Wancheng blinked. "You'll still be watching me bathe, though."

Lin Qingyu's tone hardened. "I said I'm not."

"Ah." Lu Wancheng laughed. "I feel shy—what should I do?"

Lin Qingyu alleviated Lu Wancheng's shyness simply by uttering four words: "Sworn brothers, good friends?"

At that, Lu Wancheng experienced an abrupt revelation. "Good friends!" he repeated.

The other two men stripped Lu Wancheng down to his underpants and helped him into the bathtub. "This body is so feeble. It doesn't even have abs," he complained. "It's hideous."

Because Lu Wancheng spent most of each day recuperating indoors, his skin was fairer even than some women's, and his limbs were slender and lean—but his figure definitely wasn't hideous. Lu Wancheng might just have found it ugly because he preferred a stronger, more muscular body.

The tub wasn't that large; the medicated water reached Lu Wancheng's lower chest. Lin Qingyu and Huantong poured water down his shoulders with wooden ladles so that the young marquess's entire body could soak in the treatment.

The aroma of herbs permeated the room and mixed with the hot steam, quickening their breaths.

"Young Marquess," Lin Qingyu suddenly said.

Lu Wancheng was splashing medicated bathwater on himself. "Hm?"

Lin Qingyu lifted Lu Wancheng's chin and studied him carefully under the light.

Lu Wancheng's heart fluttered. "Why are you looking at me?" he asked, his voice deep.

Lin Qingyu released him, smiling. "I think I've figured you out."

Seeing Lin Qingyu's expression, Lu Wancheng couldn't help but smile as well. "How so?"

"You appear idle, but you actually want to excel in everything. Like me, you detest the feeling of being beneath someone. And that's why you forced yourself to work hard and be the best student, although you hated studying. That's why you still learned everything properly, even after your so-called mother placed so many responsibilities on you, depriving you of proper rest. It's also why you ended up involved with administrating the marquess's household, even when you didn't want

to concern yourself with that."

A layabout who hated losing, who wound up emerging as the victor despite slacking off—what a strange man Lu Wancheng was.

Lu Wancheng's eyes gleamed with mirth. "You're right, but not entirely. Back when I was a student, other students vied alongside me to be the best; if I didn't want to lose, I had no choice but to study. But now I'm here in the marquess's residence on death's door. What is there for me to compete for?" Lu Wancheng now seemed perplexed as well. "Exactly… Why am I doing all that?"

"You'll have to ask yourself that," Lin Qingyu said flatly.

Lu Wancheng contemplated the answer for a while. He looked up at Lin Qingyu, whose eyes were shrouded by the mist but held a hint of warmth.

"It's because the young marquess merely needs to give orders, of course. He has someone else to do his bidding. That's not tiring," Huantong declared.

Startled by the servant's voice, Lu Wancheng submerged himself in the bath, leaving only his head above the water's surface. "Why are you here?"

Huantong scratched his head. "I've been here since we arrived."

Lu Wancheng had nothing to say to that.

After the medicinal bath, Lu Wancheng got a good night's sleep. The next day, he was much more energetic, and his cough had abated somewhat. The young marquess couldn't help but guess, "Is this the 'last moment of radiance before sunset' that people speak of?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Yes. We can prepare for your funeral."

"Then I shall think about what to wear so that I'll look cool when I die," Lu Wancheng said with a smile.

Having heard Lu Wancheng make so many jokes about his own death, Lin Qingyu had stopped taking them seriously. But now…

He looked at the verdant greenery outside the window and slowly clenched his fists.

After lunch, Lu Wancheng went to take his usual nap but couldn't fall asleep; the sounds of music playing disturbed him. Lin Qingyu had Hualu see what was happening outside, and it turned out that Lu Qiaosong's courtesans were the ones playing.

Qingdai Pavilion was some distance from Lanfeng Pavilion, so they usually weren't disturbed as Lu Qiaosong entertained himself there. Strangely, though, Lu Qiaosong had someone playing the pipa in the gazebo nearest to Lanfeng Pavilion today. Not just that—the women's chatter and laughter came into Lanfeng Pavilion from time to time.

Not bothering to conceal his distaste, Lin Qingyu remarked, "Why isn't he dead yet?"

"Is your formula not working?" Lu Wancheng asked.

"Hardly," Lin Qingyu replied coldly. "But perhaps he doesn't dare drink or indulge in pleasures to the same extent as before because he knows how weak he is. I'll go take a look."

Lu Wancheng sighed, getting up with difficulty. "I'll come with you."

Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng's wheelchair to the gazebo. Even from afar, they could see many people inside. The young men were all the friends Lu Qiaosong enjoyed poetry with. The third young master, who saw himself as distinguished and refined, often gathered with friends to drink and recite poetry together—supposedly. Whether they did anything else was something only they knew.

Since Lu Qiaosong was still sequestered with the residence, his friends had come over. They sat in a circle inside the gazebo, each with a pretty woman in his arms. There were also several courtesans playing the pipa in the gazebo.

Lu Qiaosong was painting freely, his friends applauding his work. A courtesan leaned against him, waving a round fan with a smile on her face.

The women playing the pipa saw Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng first. They'd never met Lin Qingyu, although they lived in the same manor. Regardless, they'd heard that this young lord was a formidable figure. One of the two women he'd previously punished had become a lowly servant who did dirty, menial work all day, while the other had gone mad and thus been banished from the residence—and before that, she had been the marchioness's most trusted servant!

Seeing Lin Qingyu, the women quickly stopped playing; the music halted abruptly, leading everyone to look over. Lu Qiaosong's face darkened, and he tossed his brush onto his painting; its ink slowly stained the paper.

Meanwhile, the looks his friends gave the two arriving visitors showed that they were intrigued. Everyone well acquainted with Lu Qiaosong knew that he had a sickly older brother who didn't have much longer to live—he must be the one in the wheelchair, they thought.

Indeed, Lu Wancheng looked the part of a noble family's eldest son. Even sitting in a wheelchair, Young Marquess Lu cut a regal figure. And the man behind him… As longtime patrons of brothels, Lu Qiaosong's cohort had seen every kind of beauty, but they were still momentarily struck by the man's appearance.

Lu Qiaosong's friends exchanged appreciative looks. They hadn't expected Young Marquess Lu to have had such luck in love despite his sickliness. What a pity, though, that he hadn't had the good fortune to enjoy that beauty to the fullest.

"This is Young Marquess Lu, I assume," said a young man wearing a sapphire-blue brocade robe. "I'm Zeng Tianlei. Greetings, Young Marquess."

Lu Wancheng propped his chin on his palm. Enthused, he asked, "Why did you all stop? Go on—play your music and resume your dancing."

Everyone traded looks of confusion. Observant as he was, Zeng Tianlei said with a smile, "Did we disturb you while enjoying the music here, Young Marquess?"

"What do you think?" Lin Qingyu snapped coldly.

Once he spoke, everyone could finally stare squarely at him. A man beside Lu Qiaosong, seemingly so drunk that he couldn't even stand straight, stared at Lin Qingyu intently. "Qiaosong-xiong, is this beauty here your brother's concubine?"

Lin Qingyu's pupils dilated slightly as he abruptly tightened his grip on the wheelchair.

Lu Qiaosong laughed heartily. "No one has sharper eyes than you, Huang-xiong. Come, tell me—why do you think he's a concubine and not his wife?"

"If…if a man marries, he should marry a virtuous wife. That wife would occupy herself with supporting her husband, raising their children, and managing their household. She would never possess such a bewitching visage."

"You should stop, Huang-xiong," Zeng Tianlei said in a low voice.

"Why? He's got a point!" Lu Qiaosong raised his cup. "Just for those words, Huang-xiong, I'll toast you!"

Lin Qingyu was about to say something when someone quickly patted the back of his hand, and he heard Lu Wancheng chuckle, "My wife here is elegant and poised—clearly the demeanor of a legal spouse. Is something wrong with your eyes, friend?"

Zeng Tianlei bowed, hands clasped in front of his chest. "Huang-xiong was rude to the young lord, but he's drunk—all his words are merely inebriated ramblings. Please don't take them to heart, Young Lord."

"Sorry. Drunk or not, he's spoken those words already. That said, you're all guests in this residence, so I should show you some courtesy." Lu Wancheng's fingertips rapped his wheelchair's handle. "What about this—if Huang-xiong here drinks ten cups of wine, I'll let his words pass. How does that sound?"

"Ten cups?" Zeng Tianlei asked. He found that a tall order. "He's already drunk. How could he possibly drink ten cups?"

"If you care so much for him, how about you drink them on his behalf?" Lin Qingyu suggested coldly.

"Uh…"

Lu Qiaosong had treated his guests to a fine aged wine. The alcohol in three cups was enough to go to someone's head, and five cups would get one drunk. Someone who quaffed ten cups would surely fall unconscious and be unable to recover for days.

"It's just wine. I'll drink on his behalf," Lu Qiaosong volunteered. "Someone serve me!"

Zeng Tianlei stopped him. "No, Qiaosong, you can't. The physician said that your health…"

"It's just some wine. And I, Lu Qiaosong, have never feared anybody!"

Unable to stop him, Zeng Tianlei watched Lu Qiaosong down cup after cup of wine. Even after the last cup, the third young master was conscious; he slammed the cup upside down on the table and wiped drops of liquid from the corner of his lips, looking at Lu Wancheng provocatively. "How about it? Happy now?"

Lu Wancheng smiled and clapped. "You really can hold your liquor, Younger Brother."

Lu Qiaosong grunted coldly. "I've drunk the wine as you wished. If there's nothing else, Eldest Brother and Sister-in-Law, forgive me—I won't see you out."

Lu Wancheng chuckled. "We should return, my wife."

Lin Qingyu's gaze swept past Lu Qiaosong as if over a dead man.

***

That night, a woman's shriek shattered the usual peace of the marquess's residence and stirred a commotion. A cacophony of panicked footsteps and furtive whispers gradually spread from Qingdai Pavilion to Lanfeng Pavilion. A short while later, Huantong rushed in, saying for real this time, "Young Master! Young Marquess! Something finally *has* gone wrong in Qingdai Pavilion!"

Lin Qingyu, who stood in front of the window, turned around and smiled at Lu Wancheng. "Wancheng, would you like to head over for a look?"

"Let's go, let's go." But after saying that, Lu Wancheng paused; he had the nagging feeling that something wasn't right. Only after a while did he realize something that made him chuckle involuntarily. As it turned out, *this* was what made that beautiful villain call him Wancheng—letting him succeed in carrying out an evil deed. As long as Lin Qingyu was pleased, he'd probably be willing to call Lu Wancheng anything.

This would have been nice, if not for the steep price: a kidney. At any rate, it wasn't his own kidney, Lu Wancheng thought—so he could just let that be.

He looked down at his chest, where his heart would be, and a thought suddenly came to his mind.

What if…what if Lin Qingyu called him by his real name? How would he feel?

Chapter 21

WHEN THE TWO MEN hastened to Qingdai Pavilion, a massive group of people was already huddled inside. The room was strangely silent, though; only a woman's desolate sobs could be heard. As Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng into the yard, the servants greeted the men, then soon fell into fearful silence. Whatever they thought of the matter, they all wore expressions so somber, it was as if they were attending a funeral.

A woman with disheveled clothing and a head of tousled hair was being dragged from the inner room by two female servants. Lin Qingyu recognized her as one of the women who'd been playing the pipa earlier that day. She pulled her thin coat around her haphazardly; her bright-red embroidered dudou had a large, dark stain, obviously blood that had yet to dry.

In the inner room, Lady Liang, Lu Niantao, and Physician Zhang stood around the bed. Lady Liang sobbed uncontrollably, tears and snot flowing down her face, and the sight delighted Lin Qingyu. Lu Niantao, who still had some sense in her, restrained herself quite adequately. She merely wiped blood off her younger brother's face, her eyes rimmed with red.

"Qiaosong, my son—Qiaosong!" Lady Liang sobbed.

Seeing that, Hualu couldn't help but grumble deep down. Whenever Eldest Young Master had been critically ill in the past, Lady Liang had watched over him at his bedside as well, but she'd wept prettily with her decorum intact. Who would've thought that she'd howl and cry like this when faced with her biological son's imminent death, creating a spectacle comparable to Auntie Qiu's?

Lady Pan waited in the outer room alongside the marquess. It was his son, after all, who was now suffering—and from something so disgraceful. The marquess looked grave and exhausted, not showing a trace of his past vigor.

"The eldest young master and young lord are here," Lady Pan said upon seeing them.

The marquess looked up slowly to see his eldest son sitting in a wheelchair, a cloak over his nightclothes. The man felt bitterness grow in his heart. He had only two sons, and he had no idea how long his eldest would get to live. Would he really lose his youngest son as well?

Noticing that the marquess remained silent, Lady Pan shook her head, gesturing to them to speak to her in the side room. When it was only the three of them, Lu Wancheng asked a question he already knew the answer to: "What's going on? Were Younger Brother and that woman they dragged out…?"

Lady Pan looked at Lin Qingyu with fear and reverence. Half of Qingdai Pavilion's courtesans were about to be sent away. Hoping to ensure that they could stay in the residence, the courtesans naturally tried everything they could to gain their master's favor.

Lu Qiaosong had previously called on a particular courtesan to attend him in bed occasionally, but in recent days, he'd no longer summoned her. She assumed that he'd gotten sick of her and wanted to send her away, so she felt the need to take action to regain her master's favor.

All men liked novelty. Thus, the courtesan had taken out the money she'd saved for years and had a servant boy bring her something from outside the residence—something that could liven things up. The herbs smelled sweet, yet not cloying, when they were burned; it was a lovely scent. She didn't dare go overboard; she merely infused her garments with the herbs' fragrance before attending to Lu Qiaosong. As she'd expected, the scent attracted him, and he carried her to his desk.

Lu Qiaosong started to favor the courtesan again, as he had before. She wished that she could give birth to his children and remain in the residence as his concubine. Lu Qiaosong was still on shaky ground after the marquess's thorough scolding, though—and he was worried about his own physical health, which made him wary of indulging in carnal pleasures as he had in the past.

During that day's gathering with his friends, Lu Qiaosong had been in a good mood, leading him to drink a bit too much without realizing. When he was carried back to Qingdai Pavilion, he was already practically unconscious from drinking.

His favored courtesan stayed in his room to take care of him. Lu Qiaosong slept until midnight before a feeling of thirst roused him. After drinking some tea, he wanted to go back to sleep, but he caught sight of the beautiful woman by his side. As he breathed in the faint scent in the air, he grew aroused without reason. Everyone said that somebody drunk would perform badly in bed, yet irresistible arousal overcame Lu Qiaosong. Thinking that his masculinity had surged, he vowed to restore the glory of his past, but then everything he saw blurred, and something warm—blood—gushed from his nose and trickled over his mouth…

"Physician Zhang is treating Third Young Master now," said Lady Pan. "He isn't doing well, judging from the physician's expression."

Lin Qingyu chuckled. "Pity." What a shame that he hadn't gotten to see blood come out of Lu Qiaosong's mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. That would probably have been an even more wonderful sight to behold than Lady Liang's current state.

Just then, Physician Zhang left the inner room. "How's he doing?" the marquess asked quickly.

Physician Zhang shut his eyes and shook his head.

"No, no—Qiaosong, Qiao—!" Lady Liang screamed, then collapsed to the floor—she had fainted.

Lu Niantao steadied her, calling out between sobs, "Mother!"

Lu Wancheng looked back, using Lin Qingyu's sleeve to wipe nonexistent tears from his face. "Younger Brother! Oh, my brother! Did you head onward to scout the way for me out of worry that I'd be lonely when my time came…?"

"Cry into your own sleeve." Lin Qingyu yanked his garment back with slight distaste.

"All right," Lu Wancheng replied in a low voice. He covered his face with his sleeves. "The West Lake is full of my tears…[18] My brother…"

The marquess's eyes were rimmed with red. "Is there really nothing else you can do, Physician?"

Physician Zhang sighed. "With my limited knowledge, I am unable to offer anything more. My sincere condolences, Marquess."

The marquess seemed to lose his strength; he stumbled backward until he collapsed forlornly into a chair.

Deciding that he'd had enough of watching from the sidelines, Lin Qingyu stepped forward. "Could you let me try, Marquess?"

Lu Wancheng looked up. "Qingyu?"

Only then did the marquess remember that his son's male wife came from a renowned family of physicians. Though he no longer felt hopeful, he decided to keep trying regardless. He waved his hand, telling Lin Qingyu to enter the room.

Seeing Lin Qingyu approach Lu Qiaosong, Lu Niantao instinctively stood in his path. Lin Qingyu looked at her, unmoving, until she stood aside, biting her lip.

Lu Qiaosong lay in bed, clearly in his final moments. His eyes and Lu Wancheng's resembled each other's somewhat; both men had been fathered by the marquess, after all. But one's state of mind undoubtedly affected their appearance, so even the deathly ill, bone-thin Lu Wancheng looked much better than Lu Qiaosong now.

Lin Qingyu lifted Lu Qiaosong's eyelids to look at his eyes before taking his pulse. "I can save his life," he said calmly.

The marquess's eyes lit up. "Really?"

"But I'm afraid he won't be able to father children," Lin Qingyu continued.

The marquess looked as though he'd been struck by lightning. Incredulous, he boomed, "What do you mean, won't be able to father children?"

"To put it simply, he's impotent now. If he were sent to the palace as a eunuch, he wouldn't even need to be castrated," Lin Qingyu replied. "Should I save him, Marquess?"

"Of course!" Lu Niantao answered hastily. "Save his life first—we can worry about everything else later!"

The marquess shut his eyes and heaved a long sigh. "Save him."

***

After the lengthy process that ensued, the sky outside was almost bright. After performing acupuncture on Lu Qiaosong, Lin Qingyu headed out, only to see Lu Wancheng still waiting for him in his wheelchair, covered with a thin blanket. He looked drowsy, about to nod off.

Lin Qingyu cradled Lu Wancheng's face in his hand. "Let's go."

Lu Wancheng rubbed his eyes. "All done?"

"Yes."

Noticing the fine sheen of sweat on Lin Qingyu's forehead, Lu Wancheng asked, "Why did you end up wanting to save him?"

"I changed my mind," Lin Qingyu said unsentimentally. "Watching him live a life of less value than a beast's will be more interesting than watching him die."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "You have a point."

***

Disaster struck the marquess's residence again and again. Within a few days, the marquess's hair had grayed at the temples. He refused to lay eyes on Lu Qiaosong again, pretending his son didn't exist in the first place. When Lady Liang awoke to hear that her son had become impotent, she was overcome with rage so intense that she sickened and couldn't get out of bed.

Lu Qiaosong, meanwhile, lost the will to live. He refused to take his medicine and collapsed both physically and mentally. Only Lu Niantao was left standing; she forced herself to stay strong so that she could care for her mother and brother.

After hearing that, Lu Wancheng said, "Your aphrodisiac worked its magic, Qingyu. Lu Qiaosong was *wasted* that night, and yet your drug let him get it up! I admire you, truly."

"If he hadn't drunk any wine, he would've been fine," Lin Qingyu replied. "The alcohol triggered the drug in his body."

"Did you make that drug yourself?" Lu Wancheng asked.

"Mm-hmm."

"You really do know your stuff, don't you?" Lu Wancheng remarked, apparently offhandedly. "In the past, did you…?"

Lin Qingyu gave him a look. "What are you trying to ask?"

Lu Wancheng cleared his throat. "I've heard that young masters from noble families usually start having intercourse at the age of fifteen, and you had servant girls attend you in your rooms. You like girls, right? Then have you ever…? Uh… Ah." Pausing in the middle of his sentence, Lu Wancheng waved his hand. "Whatever. Pretend I didn't say anything."

His timid expression tickled Lin Qingyu. "I haven't."

The corners of Lu Wancheng's mouth perked up. "You haven't?"

"My father has only one woman in his heart—my mother. I always thought that was nice, so I didn't want to do it with random women."

Lu Wancheng felt a surge of deep reverence. He patted Lin Qingyu's shoulder. "You're ahead of your time, my friend. Keep it up, and you'll have a bright future."

"How about you?" Lin Qingyu shot back.

"Me? Look at this body. How could I ever have done it?"

Lin Qingyu nodded, looking somewhat awkward.

"Come on, no need to be shy, Qingyu. Discussing this is very normal for men," Lu Wancheng said with a smile. "Poor me. I'm going to die a virgin."

Lin Qingyu had nothing to say to that.

"Say, what does it feel like?" Lu Wancheng was somewhat curious. "Why do they like doing it so much? Isn't it tiring?"

"Do I look like I know the answer?" Lin Qingyu asked, his expression deadpan.

“Then do you want to give it a try…?”

Lin Qingyu interrupted him icily. “No. Piss off.”

***

The marquess forbade anyone to spread word of the humiliating debacle that had occurred at his manor, but word would always get out eventually. Gossip about Lu Qiaosong’s impressive misadventure ended up being spread outside the residence, becoming fodder for the capital’s nobles. Some lamented his fate, while some others made light of it. Who’d have expected such a disaster to happen in the residence of the marquess of Nan’an, such an influential figure in the court? Now he wouldn’t have anyone to continue the family line. Who would receive his staggering inheritance a century from now?

Once the news reached other branches of the Lu family, they had ideas brewing. If the marquess’s bloodline was to end, then their ancestors had mandated that he adopt a son from another branch of the family.

After receiving numerous letters from Lin’an, the marquess was furious. His two sons weren’t dead yet, and neither was he. These relatives of his had wasted no time—were they so sure that his family line would die off?!

Enraged, he called Lady Pan over. “There’s something that Lady Liang should do, but you know as well as I do how she’s faring right now. She’s no longer any use.”

After receiving the marquess’s orders, Lady Pan hesitated for a long time, dragging the matter out for days before going to Lin Qingyu. First, she told him that a branch of the Lu family would be visiting the marquess’s residence in the capital, saying that they wanted to celebrate a reunion as the Mid-Autumn Festival approached. Everyone with a discerning eye saw their ulterior motives, though.

“On this occasion, the marquess’s older brother and his family will visit,” Lady Pan explained. “I hear that they’ll bring a number of people with them. I think the residence will be bustling with activity this Mid-Autumn Festival.”

“You can oversee preparations for their welcome and for the festival,” Lin Qingyu said. “You don’t need to ask me about it.”

“That’s what the marquess said,” Lady Pan replied, watching his expression tentatively. “He said that he doesn’t want to think about anything but continuing his family line.”

When Lin Qingyu raised an eyebrow, Lady Pan found his demeanor similar to the young marquess’s. She couldn’t help thinking that it was natural for a husband and wife to resemble each other more by the day if they were always together.

Lin Qingyu gave her an appraising look. “So you’re here to ask me for fertility medicine?”

Lady Pan was stunned; her face flushed with embarrassment. “Y-you misunderstand, Young Lord.”

“It won’t be that challenging,” Lin Qingyu said indifferently. “You’re barely past thirty, and the marquess is only forty. If you nourish and care for your body properly, giving birth won’t be too difficult.”

Finally reaching her limit, Lady Pan cut to the heart of the matter. “Young Lord, what the marquess intended to say was that, now that Eldest Young Master is in better health, i-it’s time for him to take a concubine.”

After a moment of stunned silence, Lin Qingyu sneered coldly. “Forgive me for being blunt, but rather than pinning your hopes on him, you might as well have the marquess work on giving him a few younger siblings.”

Chapter 22

LIN QINGYU HAD REJECTED the prospect Lady Pan raised so wholeheartedly that he'd invoked the marquess's name. Lady Pan respected and feared the young lord in equal measure—this was the son of the man who'd saved her life, after all—so she didn't dare say much on the matter. She changed the topic quickly, bringing up the preparations they'd make for the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Lin Qingyu wasn't really listening. It was his mistake that he'd failed to consider this possibility. After Lu Qiaosong lost the ability to continue the family line, of course the marquess would pin his hopes on Lu Wancheng. The young marquess was sickly, yes, but he might manage if he forced himself to.

That night, Lu Wancheng returned to his room after a bath only to be met by Lin Qingyu's undecipherable gaze. An ominous premonition came over him. "What's wrong?"

"How have you been recently?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Lu Wancheng chuckled. "You take my pulse daily. You should know the answer better than I do."

"I'm not asking about your health." Lin Qingyu's gaze trailed down Lu Wancheng, falling on a certain spot. He raised his chin to point at it. "Does it still get hard?"

This topic depressed Lu Wancheng. With resentment in his gaze, he remarked, "I've been taking the medicine you gave me diligently, yet you have the nerve to ask me that?!"

That medication's side effects were temporary. He would revert to normal if he stopped taking the medicine for a few days, or if Lin Qingyu jabbed some acupuncture needles into him. In other words, the function of his nether regions depended solely on Lin Qingyu.

At first, Lu Wancheng had felt humiliated by this, but he wound up giving in. As Lin Qingyu had said, he had no use for it anyway. He was fine with his impotence; in any event, that struggle was getting rather tiring.

Lin Qingyu nodded. "Come to me if you think it's worthwhile. I'll give you acupuncture so that you can get it up."

Lu Wancheng found that offer strange. "Why would I think it's worthwhile?"

"To produce a male heir and continue the family line," Lin Qingyu spat icily. Lu Wancheng was smart; this should be enough to make him understand.

As Lin Qingyu had expected, Lu Wancheng laughed when he understood. "Oh, I see. Someone talked to you about this."

Lin Qingyu didn't have the patience to beat around the bush with him. "Do you want to take a concubine?" he asked.

Seeing Lin Qingyu's serious expression, Lu Wancheng mischievously swallowed the words "of course not"—which had practically been on his lips—and pretended to be hesitant. "I want to, but also, not really."

Lin Qingyu's brow furrowed slightly. "Speak so a human can make sense of it."

"To be honest with you, I've never held a girl's hand in my almost twenty years of life. If I could hold a warm, soft body in my arms before my death… Well, that sounds pretty nice, I think."

Ha. A few days earlier, Lu Wancheng had expressed admiration that Lin Qingyu hadn't had any girls in his rooms before, saying that he'd have a bright future. Today, he was imagining a warm, soft body in his arms.

How shameless.

Lin Qingyu was about to ridicule Lu Wancheng over that when he happened to glimpse the upturned corners of the other man's mouth. He scoffed internally. Lu Wancheng was obviously riling him up on purpose; if he got serious about it, he'd lose this battle.

"What sort of women do you like?" he asked calmly. "Tell me so that I can keep an eye out for you."

Lu Wancheng considered that, apparently gravely, only to give a shallow answer: "Someone pretty, with a mild temperament, who won't lose her temper at me."

"Understood," Lin Qingyu said. "I'll pick a concubine for you tomorrow. Go to bed."

Lu Wancheng was befuddled. "You're going to sleep just like that?"

"What else should I do? Do you have something further to say?"

Lu Wancheng tried to hold his words in, but to no avail. Through the screen between them, he asked, "Qingyu, are you actually planning to help me find a concubine? I'm your official husband!"

"Husband? I don't have one," Lin Qingyu joked. "I merely have a sworn brother, so I'm helping myself find a sister-in-law. Your child will have to call me their uncle."

Lu Wancheng couldn't help but regret that he'd suggested that. "Can you stop bringing up that sworn-brothers thing?"

"Why should I?" Lin Qingyu chuckled mockingly. "Who was it that kept on prodding me to become his sworn brother?"

Lu Wancheng couldn't breathe. "I'm regretting it. We didn't taste each other's blood when we performed that ceremony, so can we agree that it doesn't count?"

"No. Brother for one day, brother for life."

"If we go by that logic, husband and wife for one day, husband and wife for life."

"That's true. But you didn't perform the wedding ceremony with me in person, and we haven't consummated our marriage. So we aren't really husband and wife either in name or in truth," Lin Qingyu replied, uncovering the fallacy in Lu Wancheng's words mercilessly.

Lu Wancheng had no rebuttal ready. He hugged his pillow, sulking.

After that, Lu Wancheng sought out the marquess himself. No one knew what they talked about in the locked study, but the marquess wound up staying in the

ancestral hall overnight and sprouting more gray hairs. Just like that, the matter of Lu Wancheng taking a concubine was set aside.

***

As the Mid-Autumn Festival approached, only remnants of the summer heat lingered. The osmanthus flowers in the yard had just started to bloom, and everyone's summer garments were becoming too thin for the weather. They didn't bother to wear more layers, though, as if that could draw out summer's peak a while longer.

While everything flourished in spring, autumn saw things wilt. The season had always been a time of despondence and loneliness. It brought down Lin Qingyu's mood as well. For the past few days, he'd been cold to everyone; he'd lock himself in the study all day, leaving the food Hualu delivered untouched for hours.

Lin Qingyu hated this despondent version of himself—he knew, of course, that such emotions were unproductive. Unfortunately, he didn't yet have ironclad control over them.

He was staring at his books absently when he heard the door creak.

Lu Wancheng entered the study with a plate of pastries. "Qingyu, look at the treats I brought you."

"Thank you," Lin Qingyu said. "You can leave them there."

Lu Wancheng wasn't satisfied. "You didn't even look at them. Where's the effort?"

Lin Qingyu eyed the plate. It held fresh osmanthus cakes; the osmanthus was probably from the tree growing in the yard. "I've looked at them. Now get out."

The young marquess stood there, unmoving. Lin Qingyu knew that Lu Wancheng was watching him, but he couldn't be bothered to respond. He tried to keep reading, but his husband's presence was simply overbearing; it hindered his focus. He shut his eyes once, then looked up. "What else do you want?"

"You're angry, Qingyu," Lu Wancheng murmured. He said this matter-of-factly, declaratively.

"I'm not," Lin Qingyu replied, his voice bland. He wasn't saying something he didn't mean; he really didn't feel angry. He just didn't want to open his mouth.

"Are you mad because I take too many naps?" Lu Wancheng hovered around Lin Qingyu, craning his neck to look at him. "I'll stop napping, then. All right?"

Lin Qingyu chuckled. "You? As if you could."

Lu Wancheng knew himself well. "That does seem somewhat implausible. What can cheer you up, then?" He sat down beside Lin Qingyu, propping his chin on the table and looking up at him. "I can let you touch my abs? Oh, wait—I don't have any now… I'll let you stroke my hair, then?" His head moved closer.

Lin Qingyu covered his eyes with one hand and pushed Lu Wancheng away with the other. "Leave me alone, all right?"

"Fine," Lu Wancheng agreed reluctantly. "Remember to eat something, though."

When Lu Wancheng strode out of the study, Huantong approached him immediately. “How did it go, Young Marquess?”

Lu Wancheng shook his head.

Huantong felt anxious. “What’s going on with Young Master? He hasn’t eaten anything all day.”

Lu Wancheng gave it some thought. “I don’t think it’s because of me, or he would’ve told me to get the hell out. By the way, do you know when the Imperial Academy of Medicine will release its exam results?”

Huantong had a revelation. “Today!”

“I thought so.” Lu Wancheng looked back through the paper windows at Lin Qingyu’s slender silhouette. “This is tough. I’m certain I can’t cheer him up.”

“What should we do, then?” Huantong asked worriedly.

“What can we do?” Lu Wancheng said lazily. “We’ll go back to sleep.”

Disappointed, Huantong protested, “How can you say that, Young Marquess? You retreat too quickly upon facing difficulty.”

Lu Wancheng poked Huantong’s head. “Trust me, your young master just wants to be alone right now. Let’s not annoy him. I trust that he’ll come to grips with this.”

Hearing them walk away, Lin Qingyu heaved a sigh of relief.

When something had bothered him in the past, he’d always found solace in medical books. Now, though, he stared intently at the pages, unable to commit a single word to memory. He was unsettled, unable to sit still; he had no idea where his heart was.

Walking out of Lanfeng Pavilion alone, Lin Qingyu wandered around the residence. *“At the sight of fallen leaves, one wistfully realized that autumn had already come.”*[19] When Lin Qingyu first arrived at the manor, it had still been snowing outside, and charcoal braziers warmed the interior of the house. In the blink of an eye, most of the year was now behind him.

The marquess often wasn’t at home, and Lady Liang and Lu Qiaosong had closed their doors as they recuperated in their rooms. Lu Niantao had busied herself with caring for both, and thus rarely showed herself. Before Lin Qingyu knew it, he’d become the true master of the marquess’s residence. The servants respected and feared him, as if none remembered the humiliation he’d experienced when he first married into the residence as the male wife meant to ward off Lu Wancheng’s sickness.

Lin Qingyu looked up at the towering vermilion walls; he felt as if he could still hear stallholders outside selling their goods. What were the crowds like in front of the Imperial Academy of Medicine four streets away? Were his old classmates—those who couldn’t compare to him, those who envied him—standing in front of the board, searching for their own names in anticipation and fear?

If he hadn’t grown sympathetic toward Lu Wancheng, if he hadn’t extended Lu Wancheng’s life by six months, where would he be at this moment?

As the autumn breeze blew, Lin Qingyu spread his hand, letting the fragrant osmanthus blossoms fall onto it, and he made a wishful bargain—he would abstain from meat for seven days if everyone he loathed failed the exam.

Yes, Lin Qingyu was a narrow-minded person who hated seeing anyone he detested live a better life than him. As he envisioned how Tan Qizhi would look when he failed his exam, Lin Qingyu felt his mood improve somewhat.

Hearing a hurried flurry of footsteps from behind him, he turned back to see Huantong struggling to catch his breath as he rushed over. “Good news, Young Master!”

“What could be good news to me?”

“T-Tan Qizhi failed his exam!”

Lin Qingyu was stunned.

Excitedly, Huantong continued, “Not just Tan Qizhi. Wang-gongzi, who said you looked like a woman; Liang-gongzi, who falsely accused you of cheating on a test… Anyone you didn’t like has failed! Isn’t that good news?”

Only then did Lin Qingyu register what he’d heard. “You went to the Imperial Academy?”

“Yes. To look at the exam results.”

“Who asked you to?” Lin Qingyu knew the answer as soon as he posed the question.

“The young marquess did,” Huantong said. “He said you’d probably like the results, Young Master.”

Lin Qingyu felt a wave of mixed emotions that he couldn’t describe. Why did Lu Wancheng know so much—even these hidden, vindictive desires of his? Who the hell was he?

He discarded the osmanthus blossoms in his palm. “I’m going back.”

Upon his return to Lanfeng Pavilion, Lin Qingyu subconsciously began to look for Lu Wancheng. He didn’t end up finding him, but he heard someone whistling; it sounded as crisp and clear as the calls of an oriole.

Lin Qingyu looked in the direction of the sound, and Lu Wancheng was sitting below the walkway with his back to the guardrail, as casual and laid-back as ever. When he met Lin Qingyu’s gaze, he lowered his hand—he’d put it to his lips while whistling—and spoke with a cheerful lilt. “You’re back. Come, let’s have dinner.”

The young man leaned against the railing, looking at the mortal world with a smile on his face, not knowing the taste of sorrow.

I gave up on taking an exam held every three years so that the man in front of me could live six more months, Lin Qingyu thought. However he thought about it, he seemed to have gotten the short end of the stick.

Luckily, Lu Wancheng was decent at whistling. Perhaps…it wasn’t that bad. Not really.

Lin Qingyu’s face lit up, his smile like the moon behind the clouds. “Sure.”

Chapter 23

FOR THE MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL, the branch of the Lu family helmed by the marquess's half brother journeyed to the capital from Lin'an. The brothers, born to different mothers, hadn't seen each other since that branch of the family split into two. Regardless of how close or distant the brothers were, it was necessary that they keep up appearances.

Everyone in the residence busied themselves with preparations for the festival; only the two masters of Lanfeng Pavilion could afford to relax. The young lord never concerned himself with these insignificant matters, and the young marquess's health had deteriorated since autumn began. While he'd been able to walk for short periods before, he now couldn't leave his wheelchair and needed to be pushed everywhere.

The visiting Lu branch had a message delivered to inform the household of their arrival time. When that time had almost arrived, Lin Qingyu, Lady Pan, and the marquess of Nan'an waited in front of the residence to receive their guests. They could see six lavish carriages slowly heading toward them from afar.

This branch of the Lu family was one of the richest families in Lin'an—a flourishing land already—and thus they entered in a grand procession. The man leading it was naturally the marquess's eldest brother, Lu Wancheng's eldest uncle. The brothers exchanged pleasantries, more polite than affectionate, then entered the residence together.

As Lin Qingyu followed them, bored, a handsome man walked over and tried to strike up a conversation with him. "You must be Young Lord Lin."

Lin Qingyu didn't respond.

Beside him, Lady Pan said, "Young Lord, this is the marquess's nephew, the young marquess's elder cousin."

"I'm Lu Baishuo. If you don't mind, you can call me Lu Laoliu—see, I'm the sixth child in my family." The man smiled charmingly. "Greetings, Aunt. Thank you for remembering me."

Isn't this Lu Baishuo guy a bit quick to familiarize himself with strangers? Lin Qingyu didn't want to become acquainted with him.

"Why wouldn't I?" Lady Pan said with a smile. "Young Lord, Sixth Young Master stayed at our manor for three months when he came to the capital on business last year. He's very close to Eldest Young Master."

Lin Qingyu hadn't known that this man and Lu Wancheng were that close. An idea gradually formed in his mind; he inclined his head to Lu Baishuo in greeting.

"Has Wancheng's health improved?" Lu Baishuo asked. "This time, I've come to the capital with lots of foods that nourish the body. I hope they'll be of some help."

"If you have nothing to attend to, Sixth Young Master, you may come with me to visit him in the residence," Lin Qingyu said.

Lu Baishuo replied, "Sounds wonderful."

The servants were busy carrying things in and guiding the guests to their chambers. Lu Baishuo put his possessions in his room before heading to Lanfeng

Pavilion with Lin Qingyu.

Before entering the front hall, Lin Qingyu asked, “Could you do me a favor, Sixth Young Master?”

“Please tell me the favor, Young Lord Lin,” Lu Baishuo said politely.

Lu Wancheng had been in good spirits for the past few days, but he’d wanted to deter guests, so he’d insisted on saying that he’d fallen ill again—and with an affliction that rendered him bedridden and would kill him should he leave the bed. He’d assumed that he could steer clear of these random relatives; he hadn’t expected Lin Qingyu to lead one to his bedside.

“Your fifth cousin’s here to visit you, Young Marquess.”

Lu Wancheng temporarily dispensed with his usual casual demeanor, putting on the airs and graces of a young nobleman. “Fifth Cousin,” he was about to say, but he noticed from the corner of his eye that the man beside Lin Qingyu looked somewhat awkward. Suddenly remembering something, Lu Wancheng smiled. “You’re pulling my leg, wife—he’s not the fifth cousin. He’s the sixth.”

Lin Qingyu narrowed his eyes slightly. “Really?” he said, impassive. “Then I was mistaken.”

Relieved, Lu Baishuo laughed heartily. “I knew it. After all, I stayed in Lanfeng Pavilion for three months last year. Wancheng would have been very heartless to forget me so soon after.”

Lu Wancheng gave Lin Qingyu a loaded look, then said gravely, “Don’t worry, Sixth Cousin. I’d recognize you even if you turned to ash.”

The cousins, both quite talkative, chatted easily, and nothing out of the ordinary could be detected. That didn’t convince Lin Qingyu, though. Lu Wancheng never exposed his flaws in front of others, and he only lowered his defenses and brought up his past with people he trusted.

If Lu Wancheng didn’t want to talk about his past, Lin Qingyu could always wait—at least until he ran out of patience and forced the words out of the young marquess.

The cousins chatted casually about their daily lives for a while, then heard a flurry of noises outside. Hualu came in to report that *all* the relatives who’d arrived today had come to Lanfeng Pavilion to visit the sick Lu Wancheng.

Lin Qingyu easily figured out what they were after—they had undoubtedly come for the sake of the marquess’s inheritance. Rather than intending to visit the sick Lu Wancheng, they wanted to put their own progeny forward. Lu Wancheng had married a male wife and couldn’t take a concubine due to his weak constitution, so he was destined never to have children. If these relatives could convince Lu Wancheng to adopt a youngest son from their branch, they would surely reap the benefits.

Hearing children in the yard, Lu Wancheng felt a headache coming on. He put his palm to his forehead. “I suddenly feel dizzy, Qingyu, so I’ll leave welcoming the guests to—”

Lin Qingyu pretended that he hadn’t heard anything. Sometimes it was fun to watch a salted fish being forced to try to swim. “Invite them in.”

Lu Wancheng was rendered speechless.

This time, quite a large group was visiting; it consisted of Lu Wancheng's cousins and their children. Lu Wancheng was quite senior in the family, and some of the relatives here even called him their granduncle. These people packed the front hall while Lu Wancheng and Lin Qingyu sat in the seats of honor.

Lin Qingyu drank his tea without a care, not saying anything unless necessary; he was determined to make a certain person work hard for once.

Since Lin Qingyu insisted on doing nothing, Lu Wancheng was forced to entertain the guests. Although incredibly reluctant, he could do so flawlessly if he needed to. He was perfectly polite and courteous, and both host and guests seemed to be having a great time.

"I hear he's still refusing to come out of Qingdai Pavilion."

"After that humiliating fiasco, of course he's too embarrassed to emerge. His mother's the marquess's second wife, after all."

"The ancient scholars said that promiscuity always brings disaster. They weren't lying about that…"

Watching as Lu Wancheng smiled and struggled to mask his impatience, Lin Qingyu suddenly realized how fun it was to toy with a layabout.

As if he sensed Lin Qingyu's gaze, Lu Wancheng looked back at him. Instantly, the impatience in his gaze was reduced to a light breeze, nowhere to be seen.

"You look quite well, Young Marquess," one of Lu Wancheng's cousins flattered him. "I believe you'll be on the path to recovering soon."

"Thank you for your well-wishes." Lu Wancheng smiled.

"Now that you're convalescing, you should consider the matter of children. I wonder what the two of you are planning?"

It was the branch's eldest son, Lu Baishuo's eldest brother, who'd asked that. The blunt question made Lu Baishuo frown, and he reminded his sibling, "That's the young marquess's own business, Eldest Brother. Let's not ask too much about it."

Eldest Brother Lu obviously wasn't that bright. "So what if I asked? This concerns the Lu family, and thus it concerns us as well," he insisted. "I hear you're planning to take a concubine, Young Marquess."

Lin Qingyu finally said something. "Where did you hear that?"

Eldest Brother Lu laughed heartily. "Don't pay that any mind, Young Lord. It's normal for a man to have a harem of wives and concubines. The young marquess is afflicted with illness, but he's a man nevertheless, with wants and desires…"

Lu Wancheng shrugged, palms up. "With this feeble body of mine, what wants and desires could I have? Even if I *do* have them, I've devoted them all to Qingyu." He turned to meet Lin Qingyu's eyes, his gaze full of a tenderness reminiscent of a clear pool of spring water. "Qingyu holds all my love and desire."

Lin Qingyu almost choked on his tea. What sort of insanity had befallen Lu Wancheng this time?

Everyone stared at one another, speechless, before exclaiming in astonishment:

"What did I tell you? As if Wancheng would have eyes for anyone else when there's the beautiful and talented Young Lord Lin!"

"Uncle, Aunt, you're so deeply in love, a perfect couple! I'm so jealous!"

“Granduncle, Grandaunt, I hope you’ll be together forever, in love for more than a century…”

Lin Qingyu’s forehead twitched, and the culprit who’d started this seemed not to dare to meet his gaze, as if he felt guilty. Lu Wancheng had covered his face with his teacup, acting as though he hadn’t heard anything.

Eventually Lin Qingyu interrupted a grandnephew’s long-winded speech. “Time to take your medicine, Young Marquess.”

Everyone had wanted to talk to them longer, but once Lin Qingyu said that, they weren’t so shameless as to stay; they got up and said their goodbyes.

After the guests left, Lu Wancheng let out a hiss before Lin Qingyu could say anything. He wrapped his arms around himself and rubbed his skin frantically. “Help. I was practically oozing grease.”

Lin Qingyu hadn’t known what it meant to be “greasy,” as Lu Wancheng sometimes said, but he sort of understood after being shown an example. “You were,” he agreed sincerely.

That night, the marquess held a banquet at the residence to welcome their guests. Lu Wancheng didn’t attend, claiming that he felt unwell. Lin Qingyu stayed in Lanfeng Pavilion as well, saying that he had to care for him.

The sky had turned completely dark and the moon shone brightly, but the stars were sparse. On a table set up in the yard was an array of mooncakes, water chestnuts, red dates, and pomegranates, along with a jug of osmanthus mead. Lu Wancheng couldn’t sample either the food or the wine, however—only look at them to satiate his cravings.

He eyed the mooncakes for a while, then turned his gaze toward Lin Qingyu. Watching a beautiful man under the night sky was a unique experience. Lin Qingyu’s long hair cascaded down his shoulders, contrasting with his snowy-white robes. The beauty mark at the corner of his eye was particularly alluring under the moonlight. It was a pity that his brow furrowed slightly, as if he had something on his mind.

What could he be mulling over during the Mid-Autumn Festival other than his home?

“The residence is crowded with all those guests right now,” Lu Wancheng said. “It’s so annoying. Maybe we could stay at the Lin residence for a few days, then come back after they leave?”

“Are you seriously thinking of running away when your guests are still here?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“I showed them plenty of courtesy today. That was enough from me.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t comment on that. He gazed downward, still holding his cup. “How did you recognize Lu Baishuo?”

“Guesswork,” Lu Wancheng said casually. “I remembered that ‘I’ was pretty close to him. You brought Lu Baishuo to meet me, so I figured he and I must go way back, and that he was Sixth Cousin. It turned out as I expected.”

Lin Qingyu nodded and poured himself a cup of mead. He didn’t ask any more questions.

“This is our first and last Mid-Autumn Festival together, Qingyu.” Lu Wancheng looked up at the moon shining brightly in the sky, smiling slightly. “When

this day comes next year, will you…will you remember me?"

Lin Qingyu gazed up at the same full moon. "Although the reason you and I met was unfortunate, we've come all this way together, and I've come to see you as a close friend. A thousand taels of gold are easy to find, compared to the difficulty of meeting a kindred spirit. I…will always remember Lu Wancheng."

He'll always remember…Lu Wancheng, huh? Lu Wancheng was quiet for a long time before he suddenly said, "At Changsheng Temple, you asked whether I had another name. I said no."

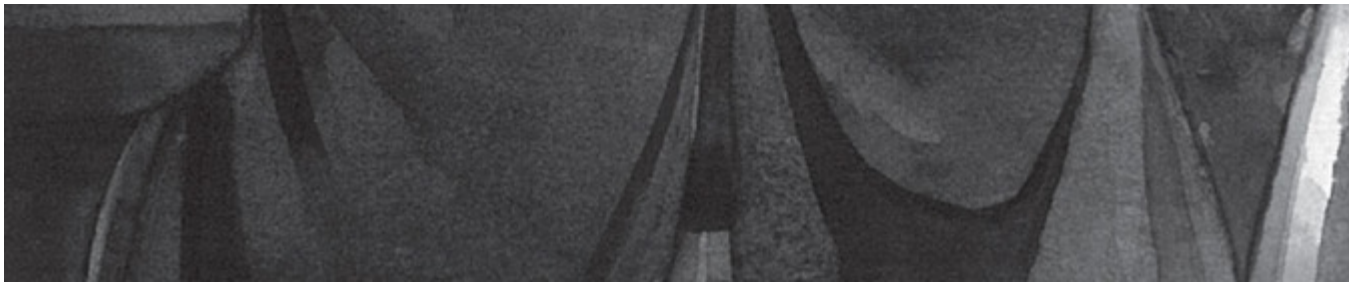
Lin Qingyu's hands closed into fists. "Mm-hmm."

"I lied to you—I do have another name," Lu Wancheng confessed, his tone low. "I hope you can remember it."

Something like nervousness flickered in Lin Qingyu's eyes.

Lu Wancheng wanted to lighten the mood, so despite his serious face, he spoke nonsense: "I'm Zhu Dazhuang.[20] Aside from 'Wancheng,' you can also call me 'Dazhuang-ge.'"

Every trace of nervousness disappeared from Lin Qingyu's face as he rose and made to leave. Someone like Lu Wancheng would never change, yet he'd tried to have a serious conversation with this man? He must've been out of his mind.



Grinning, Lu Wancheng stopped him. “All right, all right. I’ll quit teasing you. To be honest, I’m Jiang…”

Before he could finish, Hualu interrupted them. “Eldest Young Master! Young Lord!” she called anxiously. “Someone’s here from the palace!”

Chapter 24

THE PERSON WHO'D COME from the imperial palace was Eunuch Feng, from Fengyi Palace. He'd arrived on the empress's orders to deliver Mid-Autumn Festival gifts to the marquess of Nan'an.

The empress wasn't like other relatives, who could often be ignored. Once her gifts arrived, Lu Wancheng, Lady Liang, and Lu Qiaosong all had to receive them in person, regardless of whether they were ill.

Lin Qingyu hadn't seen Lady Liang for several days. She looked as if she'd aged ten years, and even makeup couldn't completely hide her haunted look. Lu Qiaosong's eyes were sunken, and his footsteps were weak; it was obvious at a glance that he'd been completely hollowed out. Compared to those two, Lu Wancheng maintained his dignity, though he'd been ill longer. That was all thanks to Lin Qingyu's medicine and Lu Wancheng's own positive mindset.

As Lu Wancheng was the only person in the manor related to the empress, the gifts bestowed on him were undoubtedly the most priceless. In addition to jewelry, jade, tonics, and medicine, he also received two fox-fur coats as a tribute from the North Kingdom, dozens of bolts of silk as a tribute from Jiangnan, and some boxes of royal delicacies. Those presents were all intended for the young marquess and his male wife. Everyone else's were clearly perfunctory in comparison.

Once everyone accepted their gifts and offered their thanks, Eunuch Feng said, "Her Majesty always thinks of the young marquess, and she specifically instructed this humble servant to ask after his health. Has the young marquess been feeling well lately?"

Lu Wancheng smiled. "I'm grateful for Her Majesty's concern. Everything is fine."

Eunuch Feng turned his gaze upon Lin Qingyu. "This must be Young Lord Lin. Speaking of the young lord, his wedding to the young marquess was Her Majesty's decision, yet she has yet to meet him."

Lu Wancheng understood the implication in Eunuch Feng's words, and his smile dimmed slightly. The marquess of Nan'an also understood and looked pointedly toward Lady Liang. But ever since falling ill, Lady Liang had seemed to be in a trance. At the moment, she was in a daze, her expression blank and slack; the marquess could only speak up himself.

"I have an imperial mandate to visit the palace and pay respects to the empress," the marquess said. "At that time, I will have the marchioness bring our family to the palace to express our gratitude."

Eunuch Feng nodded in satisfaction. "Good, good. In that case, this humble servant shall no longer disturb the marquess's family in their celebration."

"Take care, sir," the marquess said politely.

Everyone took their gifts back to their respective courtyards. There, Lin Qingyu told Hualu to put everything away.

This was Hualu's first time seeing tributary silk. As soon as she picked it up, she couldn't bear to put it back down. "I've never touched such light material. It must

feel so cool when you wear it during the summer," she said. "Tomorrow, I'll go to the manor's tailor and tell him to use this silk to make Young Master and Young Lord new clothes."

"Just for Young Lord," said Lu Wancheng. "I don't need any."

"Wait. Why not—?"

Huantong struck Hualu with the back of his hand. Realizing something, she sheepishly closed her mouth.

"You may both leave," Lin Qingyu said.

Now that Eunuch Feng had interrupted them, neither Lin Qingyu nor Lu Wancheng was in the mood to keep watching the moon. Lu Wancheng always chatted away, wearing a smile—but once he quieted down, he seemed noticeably annoyed, despite not saying a single word to that effect.

He had no idea what Lu Wancheng was annoyed about, but Lin Qingyu was quite annoyed as well. Although he'd treated Lu Wancheng as a close friend, that didn't mean he could forgive their marriage. He hadn't forgotten that the empress single-handedly enacted the wedding between himself and Lu Wancheng. Thus, he might never warm to her, even if she genuinely cared about Lu Wancheng.

After a long silence, Lu Wancheng said, "Qingyu, I…I don't want you to go to the palace."

Lin Qingyu didn't understand. "Why not?"

"I just…don't want you to," Lu Wancheng murmured.

Lin Qingyu furrowed his brow. "I don't want to go to the palace and see the empress either. However, if I pass the Imperial Academy of Medicine's entrance exam, I'm bound to enter the palace someday."

Lu Wancheng looked as if he'd had an epiphany. "Then…could you not enter the Imperial Academy of Medicine?" he asked hesitantly.

Lin Qingyu went quiet for a while. When he next spoke, his tone was chilly. "Are you serious?" If Lu Wancheng was asking that earnestly, then it had been a waste of time knowing him.

Lu Wancheng laughed bitterly. "Forget I ever said that."

On the other side of the manor, the marquess was harshly upbraiding Lady Liang in front of the servants. Lu Niantao stood by the door, waiting for the marquess to emerge from the chamber; she hoped to say some words in Lady Liang's favor.

"You'd better persuade your mother to act like a proper marchioness," the marquess said icily. "Otherwise…hmph."

Lu Niantao's heart instantly sank.

It was entirely understandable that the marquess of Nan'an was so dissatisfied. Both his sons had sickened, one after the other, so of course he was heartbroken as a father. But life had to go on, and the Lu family's honor depended on him. Lady Liang was his main wife, so an imperial mandate was her responsibility. The marquess's concubines and daughters-in-law could deal with issues within the manor, but outside, it was Lady Liang who needed to keep up his image.

Lu Niantao knew that very well. She tried desperately to reinvigorate Lady Liang, but the marchioness had already given up. "Qiaosong is my only son," she

said. “Now that he can no longer father children, what do I have to look forward to?”

“Eldest Brother can’t father children either,” Lu Niantao reminded her mother. “And in the future, no matter whether the concubines have children or Father adopts a child from the extended family, you’ll still be the main wife. How could you have nothing to look forward to?”

“What use is being the main wife?” Lady Liang wailed. “Haven’t I been good enough to Lu Wancheng all these years? But he still doesn’t acknowledge me as his mother!”

“But you still have me, your daughter,” Lu Niantao said quickly.

“Daughter…” Lady Liang laughed bitterly. “A daughter eventually marries into another family. How can I depend on you?”

“That rests on whom I marry.” A scheming glint flashed in Lu Niantao’s eyes. “Have you ever heard *The Song of Everlasting Regret*?”[21] She quoted the poem. “‘Her siblings have all become nobles, and glory has descended upon the family thanks to her. That has led all the parents in the world to want only daughters rather than sons.’ If a daughter marries well, it brings glory upon her family—the present empress is a prime example, isn’t she?”

Lady Liang froze, tears still in her eyes. *The empress…*

Lady Liang had never dared to express her anger to the empress herself. The empress’s younger sister had been the marquess of Nan’an’s first wife, so naturally, the empress didn’t pay much attention to his second wife, Lady Liang, nor to her two children. Even the gifts Lady Liang had received tonight couldn’t compare to a tenth of what the empress had given to Lu Wancheng.

Lady Liang had held resentment in her heart. But the empress lived in the imperial palace, and her father was the all-powerful Duke Wen, so Lady Liang could only pursue her, trying to flatter her.

“You’re right.” Lady Liang straightened her back. “I can’t carry on like this. Your mother will find a good family for you to marry into. Then we’ll see who dares to look down upon us three!”

Lu Niantao had long since reached marriageable age, and for the last couple of years, Lady Liang had kept an eye out for a good husband for her. There were many marriages between the elites of the capital, and the wives of titled officials all knew each other. If Lady Liang wanted to find Lu Niantao a good husband, she couldn’t keep herself locked up in the manor. She had to go outside and speak to others. Perhaps entering the palace to express her gratitude to the empress would be a perfect chance.

The next day, Lady Liang miraculously recovered from her feigned illness. She handed in a request to enter the palace, and after receiving the empress’s permission, she sent a messenger to Lanfeng Pavilion instructing Lin Qingyu to prepare to visit the palace with her.

Lin Qingyu just found that laughable. “A man like me even entering the Inner Palace… This is an unprecedented event.”

“You can’t say that,” Lu Wancheng responded as he lay in bed. “Those imperial physicians who care for the empress and concubines also enter the Inner Palace, don’t they?”

Lin Qingyu glanced at him. “You sure have a way with words.”

“Qingyu,” Lu Wancheng said quietly, “I want to go with you.”

He wanted to see his aunt, Lin Qingyu figured. “In the future…there will be chances.” The royals living in the palace were so important that sick people couldn’t enter, in case they brought their illnesses inside.

Lin Qingyu normally dressed plainly, but to enter the palace and express gratitude, he would have to dress in extravagant clothes. Watching Huantong tie a jade belt around Lin Qingyu’s waist, Lu Wancheng felt as though he could encircle that waist with both hands—his original hands, of course.

Once Lin Qingyu was dressed, his extravagant formal clothing didn’t appear at all bulky. Instead, it made him look ethereal and otherworldly.

The longer Lu Wancheng looked at him, the more uneasy he grew. When Lin Qingyu was about to depart, the young marquess couldn’t stop the words from leaving his mouth: “How about not going, Qingyu? Just say you suddenly fell ill…”

“I don’t have any objections to doing that, but can you give me a reason?” Lin Qingyu asked. Lu Wancheng was hiding something from him—Lin Qingyu had always known that.

Lu Wancheng paused. “I don’t want the crown prince to see you.”

“Why not?”

After another bout of hesitation, Lu Wancheng said with feigned nonchalance, “Because you’re too beautiful, of course. I’m afraid that greasy crown prince will notice you. Oh—besides the crown prince, you’ll have to be careful of the emperor, too. All old men like young and pretty ones…”

Lin Qingyu didn’t know what to say.

Lu Wancheng saw his incredulous expression and laughed lightly. “I’m actually afraid, Qingyu.”

Lin Qingyu paused and summoned his patience. “After the Mid-Autumn Festival, it’s time for the royal autumn hunt, so the crown prince and other princes should be at the hunting venue right now. I won’t run into them.”

Hearing that, Lu Wancheng felt a bit calmer. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Each year, Lin Qingyu’s father attended the autumn hunt too, so he remembered it very well.

Lu Wancheng heaved a sigh of relief. “Then go. Increase the empress’s friendship level and come back soon.”

Lin Qingyu, Lady Liang, and Lu Niantao shared the same carriage to the palace. It was evident that both Lady Liang and Lu Niantao had put great care into their appearances. Lady Liang didn’t look like she’d ever been despondent and ruined; instead, she looked elegant and graceful in the requisite court dress. Lu Niantao wore a light-blue silk skirt, looking as fresh and charming as a spring blossom.

Their carriage had to stop at the palace entrance, so they needed to walk the rest of the way. Lin Qingyu raised his head to view the plaque hanging high above the gate.

A year earlier, he’d never have imagined entering the palace for the first time as a male wife in the marquess’s family.

The trio followed a eunuch to Fengyi Palace, where Eunuch Feng greeted them, horsetail whisk in hand. “Lady, Young Lord, Young Lady, you’re here. Please follow this humble servant inside.”

In the main hall, Lin Qingyu saw the current empress of Great Yu, Empress Wen.

Empress Wen was around Lady Liang’s age. Though nearly past her prime, she exuded a sharp and overpowering aura as the mother of the nation. She allowed the three visitors to sit, made neutral small talk with Lady Liang, and then turned her attention to Lin Qingyu. He was so beautiful and graceful that although his origins weren’t exceptional, he was a worthy partner for her late sister’s only son.

“I’ve heard that since you married into the marquess’s family, Wancheng’s health has gotten much better,” Empress Wen said. “I’m glad that I didn’t beg the emperor to bring about this marriage in vain.”

She spoke as if that were a great blessing. Lin Qingyu was disgusted, but—knowing that the palace differed from the marquess’s manor—he could only endure this humiliation from the empress.

Empress Wen spoke up once more. “You’re the one looking after Wancheng’s health now?”

Within the scent of Fengyi Palace’s unique incense, Lin Qingyu confirmed, “Yes.”

Empress Wen nodded approvingly. “As I’d expect of the son of Head Imperial Physician Lin.”

Empress Wen’s attention didn’t leave Lu Wancheng for more than three sentences. Beyond the courteous small talk at the beginning of the visit, she didn’t say a word more to Lady Liang or Lu Niantao. Although cast aside, the mother and daughter had to keep respectful smiles on their faces constantly.

As Lin Qingyu and the empress conversed, Eunuch Feng entered to announce, “Your Majesty, His Highness the crown prince is headed toward Fengyi Palace. He’s probably coming to pay respects to you.”

Lin Qingyu frowned slightly. Why would the crown prince be appearing at Fengyi Palace at this time?

Empress Wen had the same question. “But didn’t the crown prince accompany the emperor on the autumn hunt?”

“Unfortunately, His Majesty contracted a cold and returned early.”

After returning from a trip, the crown prince naturally had to come to Fengyi Palace and pay his respects immediately. After all, although he was Noble Consort Chen’s son, the empress was the main wife.

Lin Qingyu wasn’t afraid to meet the crown prince, but if Lu Wancheng didn’t want him to, then he wouldn’t. He rose. “Since the crown prince is here, I’ll bid you farewell now.”

Lu Niantao opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something. Empress Wen nodded, however, and Eunuch Feng escorted them out of Fengyi Palace.

Outside the palace, Lin Qingyu saw a young man wearing jade headgear and black dragon-embroidered robes approaching them. He quickly hastened his footsteps. Beside him, Lu Niantao asked, “Why are you walking so quickly, Sister-in-

Law? The crown prince is right behind us. If we don't go and pay our respects, won't that be impolite?"

"Will it be polite, then, for an unmarried girl like you to approach the prince directly to pay respects?" Lin Qingyu retorted coldly.

That rendered Lu Niantao speechless, and her face turned bright red. However, she refused to walk a single step more, as if her feet became rooted to the ground. Now that she'd delayed the group, the crown prince quickly overtook them, and Lin Qingyu could only pay his respects alongside Eunuch Feng. "Your Highness."

The crown prince was extremely handsome—beautiful, even—and had been named the nation's next ruler. No wonder Lu Niantao would take any opportunity to speak with him.

Looking down upon the group, the crown prince's gaze swept over Lady Liang and Lu Niantao to land on Lin Qingyu. "Who are you? How did you enter the Inner Palace?"

"Your Highness," said Eunuch Feng, "this is the young lord of the marquess of Nan'an's manor, Head Imperial Physician Lin's son."

"The young lord," the crown prince echoed and narrowed his eyes. "That male wife."

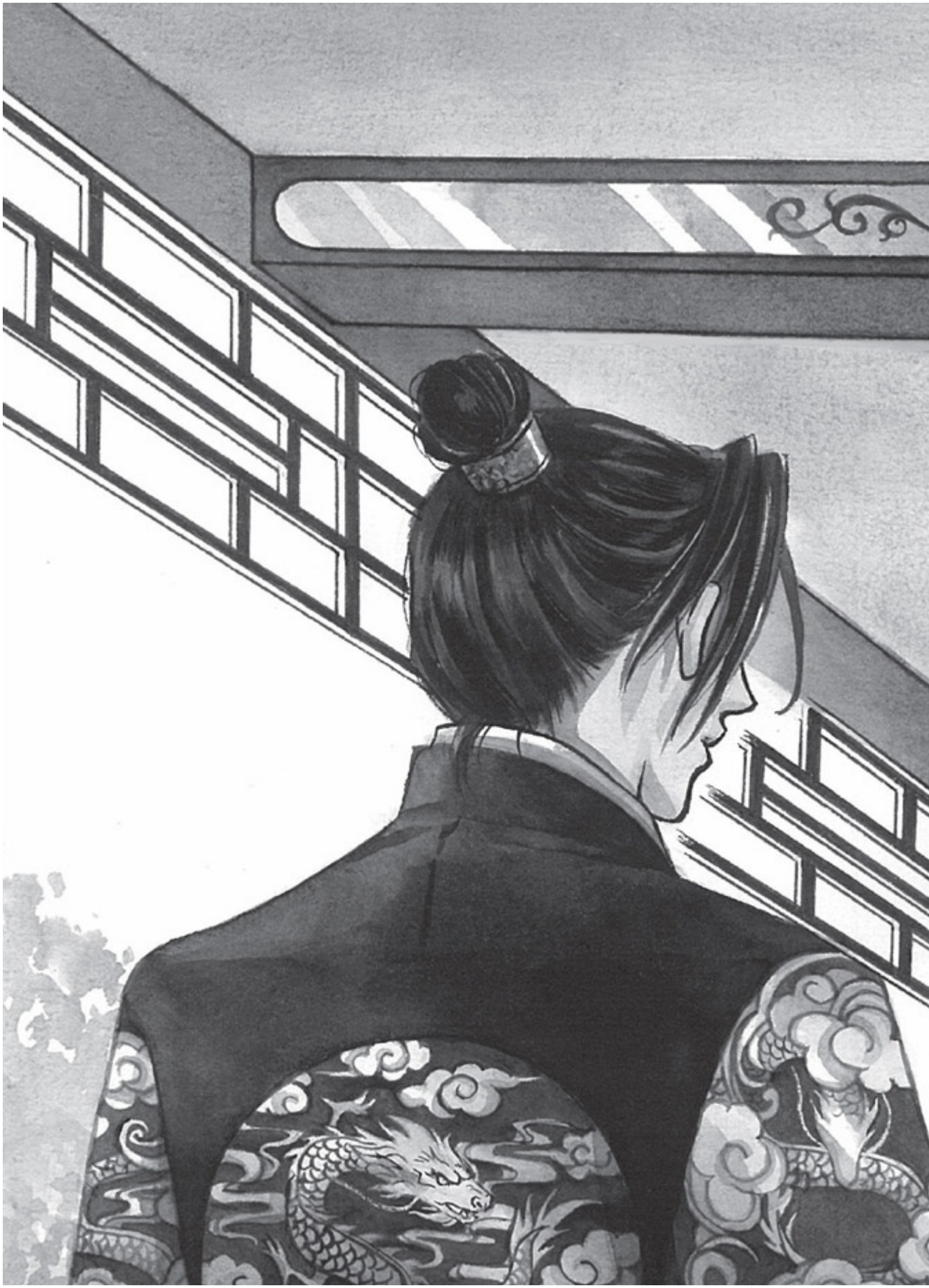
"Precisely the one," Eunuch Feng confirmed.

That piqued the crown prince's interest. "Raise your head."

Lin Qingyu didn't.

"Did you not hear that I, the prince, spoke to you?"

I didn't. Now scram. But Lin Qingyu took a deep breath, lowered his eyes, and slowly raised his head.



When the crown prince saw the mole at the corner of Lin Qingyu's eye, his eyes instantly widened, and his breathing became agitated.

Eunuch Feng, who'd been in the palace for many years, was adept at reading the atmosphere. At that point, he quietly reminded the prince, "Her Majesty is waiting for you inside, Your Highness."

The crown prince jerked as if awakening. He realized that he'd lost his composure, yet his gaze remained locked on Lin Qingyu. "What's your name?"

"…Lin Qingyu."

"Lin Qingyu." The corners of the crown prince's mouth curled into something resembling a smile. "I'll remember you," he said, then turned and strode into Fengyi Palace.

Lin Qingyu suddenly felt as though Lu Wancheng's declaration that 'Qingyu holds all my love and desire' hadn't actually been greasy in the slightest.

Returning to the manor, Lin Qingyu changed out of his formal clothes and found Lu Wancheng in the bedroom. Lu Wancheng seemed to have forced himself to stay awake for a long time; yawning, he said, "You're back? Hey—why'd you change already? I didn't see enough…"

"I saw the crown prince in the palace today."

Lu Wancheng froze, all his sleepiness fading. "How is that possible?"

Lin Qingyu told him everything that had happened in Fengyi Palace. As Lu Wancheng listened, his eyes gradually darkened, and he leaned back.

"I'll be damned," he said in a low voice.

Lin Qingyu's brows furrowed tightly. "Will there be a problem? The crown prince…"

Lu Wancheng sank into thought for a long time. "Was he greasy?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. "A bit."

Lu Wancheng laughed as always. "Well, you've already seen him, so there's nothing that can be done. Do the things you want to, Physician Lin. Let other people worry about everything else."

Since Lin Qingyu slept lightly, he heard the quiet coughing that began at some point during the night. Opening his eyes, he saw candlelight behind the screen. He left the divan and, rounding the screen, saw Lu Wancheng seated in front of the desk in his nightclothes, wrapped in a robe. He coughed as he wrote something. Upon noticing Lin Qingyu, he said, "Did I wake you? My apologies. I couldn't help it." He cleared his throat.

Lin Qingyu poured him a cup of warm water. "It's quite late. What are you doing instead of sleeping?"

Lu Wancheng stopped writing. Pressing his fist to his lips, he coughed again. "Thinking about things."

Lin Qingyu lowered his head and saw a few names and a couple of odd symbols on the paper: *[North Kingdom], Xiao Cheng & Shen Huaishi (?), Xiao Jie & Little Eunuch, Xiao Li (X) & Empress.*

"Xiao Cheng, Xiao Jie, and Xiao Li are the three princes' names," Lin Qingyu said, then lowered his voice. "Wancheng, what exactly are you thinking about?"

Seeing Lin Qingyu's grave expression, Lu Wancheng smiled. "I was just scribbling random things. You needn't worry." He tore the paper in half and burned it on the candle.

Yet instinct told Lin Qingyu that Lu Wancheng hadn't simply been writing randomly. He…planned to do something to the princes.

Why?

Lu Wancheng had never stepped outside the manor gate; he barely set foot outside the *courtyard* gate. Even if the empress was his aunt by birth, he'd never been entangled in palace politics. Maybe this was just for the marquess's household?

The marquess of Nan'an was an important dynastic official. He never participated in partisan conflicts, so the emperor appreciated him greatly. So long as the marquess avoided getting into trouble and stayed loyal to the emperor and later the crown prince, his estate would continue to prosper. Lu Wancheng didn't need to do anything.

Then, was this for…

"…Is it for me?" Lin Qingyu asked quietly.

Lu Wancheng was silent for a while, then said half-jokingly, "Yeah—see how good I am to you? I'm on death's door, but I'm worrying about you until the very end." He propped his cheek on one hand and unconsciously twirled his brush in the other, smiling at Lin Qingyu from within the shimmering candlelight. "So you need to be more gentle to me this autumn. You can't be mean anymore, all right?"

Ink flew from the brush's tip. Lin Qingyu looked at the jet-black specks on his nightclothes, unable to explain the emotions within his heart.

Chapter 25

AUTUMN RAIN BROUGHT ALONG autumn chill. The dampness cleared away the last lingering threads of vicious summer heat. A large vat for water had been placed in front of the main hall, and the constant plip-plops produced by raindrops hitting the water's surface combined into a relaxing sound.

When Hualu passed by the study, she saw the window open and light inside. She thought that the young lord might be reading in the chamber, but when she walked in, the person sitting at the desk was the young marquess.

Hualu had to confirm this repeatedly, rubbing her eyes several times to make sure she wasn't seeing things. "What are you doing in the study, Young Master?"

The young marquess only came to the study to bother the young lord, but the young lord wasn't there.

"Solving a problem," Lu Wancheng said in despair.

"A problem?" Hualu walked over and took a peek. On the paper was only a mess of writing that she couldn't understand. She reached out to close the window, but Lu Wancheng stopped her.

"I feel dizzy. I want to feel the wind," he said.

"You can't, Eldest Young Master." Hualu forced the window closed. "The young lord said that you can't be around cold winds."

Lu Wancheng tossed his brush down and slumped in his wheelchair. "My head hurts, I'm tired, and I'm annoyed. I don't want to think anymore."

He'd already been mulling things over for an entire hour. Using his brain so intensely truly exhausted him, and it reminded him of his tragic school days, when he'd had to spend time half-assing homework although he hated studying.

Hualu thoughtfully cleared away the paper, ink, and brush. "If you are tired, Young Master, please sleep for a while."

Lu Wancheng looked out the window. Gray clouds covered the sky, and autumn rain fell ceaselessly. It truly was perfect weather for sleeping. He'd already worked hard for an hour, so it was indeed time to give up for now.

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Lin Qingyu finished bathing, and he'd just put on his inner layers of clothing when he heard a door opening; the creak was accompanied by damp, cold wind rushing inside. Lin Qingyu turned and met the gaze of the person entering.

"You're back," he said neutrally. He'd only half dried his long hair, which fell in front of his chest, soaking his inner clothes. Those garments were made of silk for the sake of comfort and fit, and the fabric quickly turned transparent when moistened.

Although Lin Qingyu had been forced to marry, he was still only eighteen years old. His pure body, half hidden beneath the translucent silk, was much thinner and more youthful than that of a grown man of twenty or thirty.

Lu Wancheng tensed, then looked away. “It’s midday. Why take a bath?”

Lin Qingyu knew that his garb at that moment wasn’t very dignified. He felt a bit awkward initially but relaxed more after noticing that Lu Wancheng looked even more uncomfortable. “Does the manor have rules against bathing during the day?”

“No, but if you bathe during the day, you’re more likely to be seen,” Lu Wancheng teased. “I saw you just now, right? Aren’t you mad?”

Lin Qingyu only grew calmer. “No. You and I are both men, and we’re sworn brothers. I don’t mind.”

Lu Wancheng held his chest. “I swear, I’ll cough blood up if you ever mention the words ‘sworn brothers’ again.”

Lin Qingyu’s eyes flashed. Given Lu Wancheng’s current condition, if he really coughed up blood, it would truly be time to prepare his last rites. “All right. I won’t mention it anymore.”

Lu Wancheng immediately looked both shocked and flattered.

Noticing that he also looked pale, Lin Qingyu helped him to bed and felt his pulse. “It seems that you haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“Because I’ve been coughing so much. If I slept well, it’d be a miracle.”

Lin Qingyu chose not to expose the lie. He just said, “Worries are the worst thing for someone chronically ill. No matter what, Wancheng, you have to let it go.”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “I’ll try my best.”

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After the autumn rain passed, the sky turned clear, the air turned crisp, and Lu Wancheng’s health took a turn for the better. The Lus’ distant relatives had stayed at the manor for nearly two weeks, and now they were finally leaving. Lu Baishuo came to Lanfeng Pavilion to bid the young marquess and young lord goodbye specifically; he said that they would return to Lin’an the next day.

Lu Baishuo was a bit emotional. When he’d visited the manor the previous year, Lu Wancheng had been less ill, and had occasionally invited him on trips outside of the residence. Before saying goodbye, Lu Wancheng had even sent him off with a meal at the capital’s most famous restaurant, Jinxiu Pavilion.

Jinxiu Pavilion was located in an opulent riverside building. Their signature dish was lamb-goose, a roasted goose stuffed inside a whole lamb. It had thoroughly astonished Lu Baishuo during his first trip to the capital. After returning to Lin’an, he’d searched high and low for a northern chef who could recreate that lamb-goose, but the taste of their dishes always lacked a little something.

Hearing that amused Lu Wancheng. “Sixth Cousin, you’ve all but written ‘Please invite me to Jinxiu Pavilion again!’ on your face.”

“No, no—I only mention it to mention it,” Lu Baishuo said in embarrassment. “To be truthful, I did visit Jinxiu Pavilion yesterday, but the restaurant attendant informed me that the private rooms were all booked for the next three days. Alas, that’s to be expected in the capital city. I should’ve gone earlier.”

“Did you tell them that you’re the marquess’s guest?” Lin Qingyu asked.

“Well, no. It was just a restaurant. Did I have to report my lineage?” Lu Baishuo said in surprise.

“Powerful people abound in the city of the emperor. Comparisons and prejudices are quite common, especially in places like Jinxiu Pavilion, where officials and elites gather. But if you really want to go back, the young marquess could accompany you,” Lin Qingyu said.

Lu Baishuo looked expectantly at Lu Wancheng. “Could we? Wancheng’s health…”

“As long as we’re attentive to him, it’ll be fine,” Lin Qingyu said. Lu Wancheng had a lot on his mind lately, which made rest useless. Taking a walk to lift his mood would be a good alternative. Besides, if he didn’t go now, Lu Wancheng… might never have another chance to leave the manor.

Lu Wancheng thought for a moment, then smiled. “Qingyu, we’ve never gone out together, have we?” he asked.

Lin Qingyu shook his head. After their wedding, he’d only gone out with Lu Wancheng twice. One trip had been back to the Lin residence, and one to Changsheng Temple. Both times, he’d ridden to their destination in a carriage; he hadn’t seen the flourishing capital city in a while either.

“Then shall you and I have dinner at Jinxiu Pavilion together? We can bring back a lamb-goose for Sixth Cousin as well.”

“Sure.”

Lu Baishuo thanked the two, although for some reason he felt that something wasn’t quite right.

Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng’s wheelchair out the door, bringing along Huantong and a few guards from the manor. They took a carriage to the entrance of Yongxing Street, where Lin Qingyu stopped the vehicle. “Jinxiu Pavilion’s not far now. We’ll walk over.”

“But walking is tiring,” Lu Wancheng protested.

Lin Qingyu was astonished. “Did I say *you* had to walk?”

“Well, I’m afraid you’ll get tired of pushing me.”

Lin Qingyu paused for a moment. “It’ll be fine.” Even if it was tiring, there were only two or three months left.

“You’ve been so gentle lately, Qingyu,” Lu Wancheng laughed. “I’m almost not used to it.”

“I’m not used to your silence lately either,” Lin Qingyu coolly replied.

Lu Wancheng was quiet for a moment, then smiled. “Have I been silent?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t say anything further, pushing Lu Wancheng into the crowd.

It was still too early to eat dinner. Banners hung high above each shop, and stall vendors’ calls overlapped in varied high and low tones. Common citizens were out on the streets, as were plenty of well-dressed wealthy ones, but no matter who saw such a divine beauty pushing a young noble in a wheelchair, they couldn’t stop themselves from taking a few glances back.

Thankfully, both men were used to being the center of attention, so they weren’t uneasy.

Huantong sniffed deeply. “Do you smell the sweetness of roasted chestnuts, Young Master?”

“Go buy some if you want,” said Lin Qingyu.

“I’ll go now!” Huantong exclaimed happily.

Lu Wancheng also sniffed. “Why don’t I smell anything?”

The senses of severely ill people often dulled or vanished completely. Lin Qingyu hesitated, then suggested, “Let’s go over there.”

They approached a street vendor selling various accessories. The material of the wares was cheap, but there were many different styles, including plenty of new and unique ones; there were also jade headdresses and hairpins men could use to style their hair. Assuming that Lin Qingyu wanted to buy some jade headdresses, Lu Wancheng meticulously picked out two. Ignoring him, Lin Qingyu picked up a woman’s hairpin with dangling decorations. He weighed it briefly in his hand, then paid.

“Do you plan to give that to your mother?” Lu Wancheng asked.

“No. It’s for you.”

“Me?”

“This dangly hairpin is about the same length as a brush. From now on, if you want to twirl your brush, you can twirl this instead. I don’t want to be woken in the middle of the night and have to change my clothes again.”

Lu Wancheng took the hairpin, laughing; then he did twirl it in his fingers. “However gentle Physician Lin acts, he’s as petty as ever,” he teased.

The group meandered toward Jinxiu Pavilion. Upon learning that they were the young marquess and young lord of the marquess of Nan’an’s manor, the manager didn’t hesitate at all to lead them to a private room.

Jinxiu Pavilion was two stories tall, and the best position within it was undoubtedly near the second-floor window—there was river scenery right outside, and it directly faced the opera stage inside. Onstage, a few female musicians played instruments. The metallic sound of the qin was flowing and full; on top of that, the woman playing the instrument was beautiful, young, charming, and graceful.

Huantong enjoyed listening to the music, but he enjoyed looking at the girls even more. “Which girl do you think is prettier, Young Master?” he asked Lin Qingyu. “The one wearing blue or the one wearing pink?”

Lu Wancheng didn’t think Lin Qingyu would answer such a boring question, so he didn’t expect Lin Qingyu to respond, “They’re both pretty.”

For a moment, Lu Wancheng didn’t know what to say.

Lin Qingyu saw the young marquess’s somewhat complicated expression. “What?”

“Nothing,” Lu Wancheng said sulkily. “I nearly forgot that you like girls.”

“What does this have to do with liking either men or women? Everyone has the ability to appreciate beauty.”

Lu Wancheng raised an eyebrow. “Then shall we move closer to appreciate them more?”

“Sure.” Lin Qingyu didn’t have any interest in watching the women, but if Lu Wancheng wanted to, that was fine with him. He pushed Lu Wancheng’s wheelchair out of their private room and stopped beside the railing.

Once he’d moved to stand there, the guests on the second floor stopped listening to the music and admiring the girls and stared at him instead. Thankfully, they knew that the other guests on the second floor were all nobility, so they were afraid to gawk too boldly.

Across from Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng sat a man in black robes. Lin Qingyu met the man’s eyes, and his gaze immediately hardened.

Lu Wancheng followed his gaze. “Who’s that?” he asked.

“The crown prince.”

Lu Wancheng’s sleepy eyes abruptly opened wide.

The crown prince’s name was Xiao Cheng, and he was the emperor’s oldest son. Like the marquess of Nan’an, the emperor had few children. Although he kept plenty of beautiful concubines in the Inner Palace, only a precious few princes had matured to adulthood smoothly. After many years and much wishful thinking, the empress had finally given birth to a son, but who could’ve predicted that he’d be intellectually impaired?

Despite the low number of princes, a fight for the throne was unavoidable. Xiao Cheng and his mother had schemed for many years and finally come out on top, moving into the Eastern Palace three years ago.

Xiao Cheng leered at Lin Qingyu unabashedly; his lips curved upward, showing his immense interest. After simply staring at Lin Qingyu that way, he lifted his cup to take a sip of wine, then beckoned a guard and told him something.

Lin Qingyu looked away. “Let’s go back inside.”

“There’s no rush,” Lu Wancheng said. “How about we quietly watch him make a fool of himself?”

Xiao Cheng’s guard made his way to the pair, holding the crown prince’s used wine cup carefully. “Greetings, Young Marquess, Young Lord Lin. His Highness has bestowed this cup of wine upon the young lord, if the young lord will kindly accept.”

Lin Qingyu spared the cup a glance, then felt as though he’d dirtied his eyes. “No need for the kindness. I don’t drink.”

The guard’s expression soured. “Please excuse my rudeness, Young Lord Lin, but whose wine do you think you’re refusing?”

“The crown prince’s, naturally,” Lu Wancheng scoffed. “Or do you mean that’s actually the nectar of the gods?”

The guard’s expression only grew more and more severe. “Are the young marquess and young lord really refusing His Highness’s kindness?”

Lu Wancheng laughed shortly, the coldness in his voice bone-chilling. “Go back to the crown prince, and ask him this: ‘It’s already been three years since Princess Jingchun married into the North Kingdom, hasn’t it?’”

Princess Jingchun? Lin Qingyu knew that name. Princess Jingchun had originally been a maid of the Ministry of Etiquette. Her beauty and kindness had caused the king of a tribal state, the North Kingdom, to fall for her during a visit three

years earlier. For the North King, it was love at first sight, and he'd asked the emperor for her hand that very same day.

The North Kingdom was a border area that had fought major and minor battles with Great Yu for years. To ensure a stable border, His Majesty had personally permitted the marriage. He'd granted Jingchun the title of princess and given her to the North King, even letting the crown prince officiate their wedding to show his sincerity.

Why would Lu Wancheng bring her up to the crown prince?

The guard could only relay the message. Upon hearing the words, Xiao Cheng abruptly raised his head, glaring daggers at Lu Wancheng. The prince wanted to find a hole in the young marquess's facade, but however he stared, he only saw a sickly, useless pretty boy with a smile hovering at the corners of his lips.

Once they'd returned to their private room, Huantong said extremely uneasily, "Young Marquess, Young Master, that was the crown prince…the future emperor. Will he eventually have our heads for offending him like that?"

"It's very possible," Lu Wancheng said, scaring Huantong on purpose. "But I'll be long gone by then, so *my* head won't get chopped off."

Huantong was so frightened that he nearly wept. "Young Marquess…"

"True," Lin Qingyu said suddenly. "You needn't worry about that particular event."

Lu Wancheng was quiet for a moment, then said lazily, "All right, I'll listen to you, Physician Lin."

After such an episode, neither man was in the mood to stroll around anymore. They ate dinner quickly, then brought a serving of lamb-goose back to the manor.

After half a day outside, Lu Wancheng's body couldn't sustain consciousness much longer, so the young marquess went to bed immediately after washing up.

It was still early. Lin Qingyu wasn't sleepy, so he went to the study. He'd developed a fascination with incense mixes lately and had been trying to recreate the incense in Fengyi Palace.

At some point, it began to rain again. In the darkness of the downpour, Lin Qingyu suddenly saw a silhouette outside of the window.

He pushed the window open only to see Lu Wancheng leaning against the windowsill, a cloak wrapped around his body and his long hair loose around his shoulders. He was panting as if he'd used all his energy to walk here from the bedroom.

Shock filled Lin Qingyu. "Why did you… Where are the servants?"

Lu Wancheng didn't answer his question. "I can't do it," he said.

"What?"

"I can ignore everything else—I'm too lazy to care about it anyway. But this… I can't shrug it off." Lu Wancheng peered at him, continuing in a low voice, "You were born to stand atop mountains. Even if you commit every evil in the world, I can't let you be reduced to a mere speck of dust."

Lin Qingyu's eyes widened.

Cold seeped into Lu Wancheng's bones, and he let out heart-wrenching coughs. Unable to stand any longer, he slowly slid down the wall he'd been leaning against.

Lin Qingyu strode hurriedly out of the study, blocking the wind and rain with his own body. "Don't talk anymore. Get back inside first."

Lu Wancheng grabbed the other man's arms, murmuring softly, "I must find the best solution to this problem once and for all."

Lin Qingyu remained silent. He'd never seen Lu Wancheng like this before; it was as if the young marquess were bound by inescapable shackles. He seemed like a completely different person from the carefree, whistling youth by the walkway that day.

Lin Qingyu always felt annoyed that Lu Wancheng was lazy, and overly forgiving, and that he never took anything seriously. But now he wished that Lu Wancheng could live out the last days of his life as carefree as he always was.

After a long time, Lu Wancheng abruptly tightened his grip and broke the silence. "Qingyu?"

"I'm here," said Lin Qingyu.

"I…" Lu Wancheng's gaze was dark, sharp, and deep. But, despite all that, he was still seriously ill; his face was as pale as snow and his lips were stained scarlet with blood. "I want Xiao Cheng dead."

Warmth pulsed in Lin Qingyu's chest. He gripped Lu Wancheng's trembling wrist.

"All right," he said gently. "Do you need any help?"

Chapter 26

THE CROWN PRINCE was the heir to the kingdom, and he was the future emperor. Wanting to kill him was tantamount to treason. If their plan got out, it would constitute such a great crime that both their extended families would be executed without mercy.

They were only two people—one deathly ill and nearly six feet under, the other a male wife trapped within the manor. It was difficult for them to enter even the main palace, much less get all the way into the Eastern Palace itself. Besides, wherever the crown prince went, shadow guards[22] always followed him.

Perhaps their plans were as futile as throwing straw against the wind and would bring about their own deaths. But if Lu Wancheng wanted Xiao Cheng to die, and Lin Qingyu did as well, then they might as well orchestrate it. If the ladies-in-waiting of previous dynasties could assassinate sleeping emperors, why couldn't they take the life of a mere prince?

Before this, Lin Qingyu had never weighed killing the crown prince. At most, he'd toyed with the thought of killing the empress. Since the crown prince had nothing to do with his marriage, he wasn't on the list of people whom Lin Qingyu wanted revenge against. Today, however, that half-drunk cup of wine in Jinxiu Pavilion had truly disgusted him.

Of course, as a man, he knew what the crown prince's leer had meant. Marrying Lu Wancheng had been one thing, but if someone else dared try to force him into a relationship, he would refuse to endure it—even if the other person was the empire's crown prince.

Since Lu Wancheng was still alive, Xiao Cheng had to take care not to offend the marquess of Nan'an, so he probably wouldn't do anything too out of line. But it was extremely likely that as soon as Lu Wancheng passed away, Xiao Cheng would make a move. Rather than waiting for the inevitable, Lin Qingyu would prefer to act first.

On the surface, he seemed to be helping Lu Wancheng, but in truth, Lu Wancheng was the one helping him.

As Lu Wancheng felt the warmth of Lin Qingyu's hand and smelled the faint scent of paper on his body, his breathing gradually calmed. For a moment, the only sound either man heard besides the rain was the other's breath.

Then, Huantong discovered that the bedroom door was open wide, and the young marquess—who was supposed to be asleep on the bed—had vanished, though his wheelchair was still in the room. Panicked, Huantong ran to the study and found the pair standing there.

Huantong let out a long breath. "Young Marquess, why have you come in here? You didn't even bring your wheelchair…"

Steadying himself, Lin Qingyu told Lu Wancheng, "You shouldn't be in the wind. I'll carry you back to the room."

Planning a murder would previously have been completely unthinkable for Lu Wancheng. He was still submerged in the turmoil of having made such a decision.

When he heard Lin Qingyu, his emotions roiled even more violently—just in a different way. “You, carry me?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” Lin Qingyu said. Lu Wancheng was frail and thin, and although Lin Qingyu had never trained for this specifically, he was at least a healthy young man. Carrying Lu Wancheng a few steps wouldn’t be a daunting task.

Lin Qingyu placed Lu Wancheng’s hand on his shoulder. “Hold on tight.”

And a princess carry, at that…? Lu Wancheng jerked his hand back, coughing. “No, no, no. I-I can walk back on my own.”

Lin Qingyu immediately sensed that Lu Wancheng’s useless male pride had reappeared. “By the time you inch back on your own, the sun will have risen.”

Lu Wancheng hadn’t felt any fatigue when he’d walked all the way from the bedroom to the study earlier that night, but now he realized that he truly didn’t have a drop of energy left. It was difficult even to stand, so he was forced to concede. “Have Huantong carry me on his back, then.”

The bedroom’s door and windows were tightly closed, keeping out the wind and rain. Inside, Huantong changed Lu Wancheng out of his rain-soaked nightclothes.

Lu Wancheng lay on the warm, dry bed, his face still pale as paper. The coppery taste of blood filled his mouth.

Hualu made a bowl of ginger tea. After drinking it with a disgusted expression, Lu Wancheng dismissed Huantong and Hualu, which left him alone in the room with Lin Qingyu.

Hualu had just told Lin Qingyu that she’d only retired to her own chamber after seeing that the young marquess had fallen asleep. From that, he deduced that Lu Wancheng must’ve awoken from a dream before risking everything to rush to the study.

Lin Qingyu sat at the edge of the bed. “Did you have a nightmare?”

“How did you know even that?” Lu Wancheng had recovered his normal casual tone. “Yes, I had a nightmare and nearly died of fright.”

“What was it about?”

Lu Wancheng didn’t say anything. He merely looked at Lin Qingyu in silence, as if trying to confirm that the man in front of him was real, whole, and healthy. Eventually, he smiled. “Ah… Was I really ugly and disheveled just now?”

Lin Qingyu told him the truth. “You looked desperate, yes, but not ugly.” Given Lu Wancheng’s personality, it was impossible for him to be truly ugly, even if something damaged his appearance.

“That’s annoying.” Lu Wancheng clicked his tongue. “In front of you, I wanted to be cool.”

After spending so much time with Lu Wancheng, Lin Qingyu had slowly adapted to the other man’s sudden, strange turns of phrase, and he could deduce their meanings from context. “Cool” probably meant something akin to “handsome and graceful.”

So he said, “I think you were quite cool back there.”

Taken aback, Lu Wancheng slid slowly into bed, pulling up the blankets to hide his face.

After that night, two people rather than one planned misdeeds secretly in the study.

Knowing the opposing side like oneself was the key to winning every battle. But Lin Qingyu's knowledge of Xiao Cheng was limited to two meetings, and his impression of the crown prince consisted of only one word: greasy.

On the other hand, although Lu Wancheng was technically Xiao Cheng's younger cousin, he rarely saw him due to his chronic health issues. Yet Lu Wancheng seemed extremely familiar with Xiao Cheng, especially regarding details of his private life.

Lin Qingyu asked Lu Wancheng to list every single thing he knew about Xiao Cheng.

Lu Wancheng thought for a long time, then said, "Xiao Cheng often has a 'cold smirk' on his face, or a 'half smile,' or 'his tongue poked into his cheek'—as though chives are stuck between his teeth. When he talks, his voice is typically 'calm and collected,' 'casual in the midst of strife,' and he likes to tilt someone's chin up without warning and say…" Lu Wancheng purposely lowered his voice to imitate Xiao Cheng. "'Look at me.'"

Lin Qingyu was rendered speechless.

"To the public, he comes off as decisive and harsh—a cold and merciless crown prince. But he looks at the person he loves with red-rimmed eyes and says in a low, hoarse voice, 'Kiss me, and I'll give you my life and nation.' He's truly the greasiest of the greasy—the *king* of grease.

"Oh, right—he also has a weird habit of nicknaming people he likes. They clearly have names of their own, but he just refuses to call them by their actual names. Ha ha. He just *has* to play around. He needs to call other people 'kid,' 'xiao-meimei,' 'xiao-didi…'"

"Enough," Lin Qingyu interrupted. "Can you say something useful?"

"I said the most useful thing ages ago," Lu Wancheng laughed.

Lin Qingyu thought for a moment. "Princess Jingchun?"

Lu Wancheng snapped his fingers. "As I'd expect of someone as smart as you. Actually, this is quite a cliché story: Xiao Cheng and Jingchun met as youths in the palace. They were childhood friends who became lovers, but Jingchun was only a maid, so how could she be a good wife for a prince? They could only meet in secret.

"Then the North King fell for Jingchun, and the emperor permitted their marriage. At the time, Xiao Cheng wasn't yet crown prince. Wanting to keep the emperor's trust, he didn't dare say jack shit… I mean, didn't dare oppose the marriage. He could only watch Jingchun wed into a faraway land, then look for comfort in people who resembled her."

"If their relationship was secret, then how do you know of it?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"I have my own sources, naturally," Lu Wancheng said. "Just trust me on this."

"How am I similar to Jingchun, then?"

"Your left eye. Jingchun also had a mole beneath hers. Most of Xiao Cheng's preferred concubines—male and female—look like Jingchun in some way, shape, or form."

“So, as long as I destroy my eye, Xiao Cheng will lose interest in me.”

“Perhaps,” Lu Wancheng said. “But you probably won’t do that, will you? I like your eyes as they are.”

“Of course I won’t.” Lin Qingyu let out a cold laugh. “Even if I’m blasé about my own face, I don’t want to harm myself over a piece of shit like him.”

What would be the point of hurting himself to defeat the enemy? He wanted to watch the opponent suffer, writhe beneath his feet, and beg for the mercy of death—all while remaining perfectly unscathed himself.

So, Xiao Cheng retained deep feelings for the married-away Princess Jingchun. How could the pair use that to their advantage…? They fell into deep thought.

Soon afterward, a servant from Mianyue Pavilion asked for Lin Qingyu, claiming that she had something to report. When Lin Qingyu allowed her inside, she said, “Lady Liang and Young Lady left the manor early this morning, then came back in the evening. Concubine Pan told me to ask the carriage driver what they did, and I found out that Lady and Young Lady went to the palace, and that they brought lots of expensive gifts with them. Then I went to the manager of the storerooms, who said that the lady hadn’t taken anything from there. That means those gifts must have been from the lady’s own dowry.”

“I see,” Lin Qingyu said. “Once you’ve returned, thank Concubine Pan for me. She’s quite meticulous.”

Lady Liang and Lu Niantao clearly hadn’t wanted to flaunt this visit to the palace. Not long had passed since the three of them went there together to pay their respects to the empress. But the empress had treated the pair like they didn’t exist. Had they gone to the palace this time to try and win her over?

After Lin Qingyu voiced his suspicions, Lu Wancheng responded, “This isn’t the first year Lady Liang has spent as the marquess’s wife. If she could have won over the empress before, she would’ve done so long ago. Why would she wait until now?”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “If not the empress, then someone else.”

“The empress isn’t the only powerful person in the palace.”

When the wives of titled officials visited the palace, they didn’t only head to Fengyi Palace. Sometimes they also paid respects to the emperor’s favorite concubines.

Staring at each other, Lu Wancheng and Lin Qingyu spoke at the same time: “Noble Consort Chen.”

Lin Qingyu recalled the way Lady Liang and Lu Niantao had looked at the crown prince that day. Lady Liang had lost her husband’s trust, she no longer ran the household, and her son couldn’t father children. Her days controlling the manor were coming to an end, which forced her to look outside for support.

The empress disliked Lady Liang because of her position as the marquess’s second wife, so naturally, she wouldn’t be willing to help. Excluding the empress, the most powerful person within the Inner Palace was the crown prince’s birth mother, Noble Consort Chen. But the marquess of Nan’an was always careful at court—he was a lone wolf who never participated in partisan conflict. If he knew that Lady Liang was surreptitiously sucking up to Noble Consort Chen, he’d surely be furious, so Lady Liang and Lu Niantao could only visit her in secret.

The crown prince in the Eastern Palace, the empress in Fengyi Palace, Noble Consort Chen in Changle Palace…and Lady Liang and Lu Niantao.

"Wancheng," Lin Qingyu said slowly, "I want to visit the Lin manor."

Lu Wancheng didn't even hesitate. "Okay. When?"

"Now."

"I'll come with you."

Lin Qingyu was just about to reject him and tell him that his health should prevent him from going out again when Lu Wancheng added, "I can ask Father-in-Law to tell me how much time I have left."

Lin Qingyu hesitated for a moment, then nodded. Lu Wancheng's health had nearly reached a point beyond Lin Qingyu's power. Even though Lin Qingyu was a naturally gifted physician…he truly wasn't sure what to do anymore. He only knew two people in the entire world whose medical abilities surpassed his own—his teacher and his father. Lu Wancheng's lifesaving medicine had been prescribed by Lin Qingyu's father, so he might even know other ways to help Lu Wancheng hold on for a few more days.

Within elite circles, a wife who wanted to bring her husband back to her parents' home needed permission from her main mother-in-law. But right now, aside from the marquess of Nan'an himself, Lin Qingyu was the only decision-maker of the manor. He didn't have to report to anyone for any reason. Still, since he wanted to bring Lu Wancheng with him to stay at the Lin residence for a few days, he perfunctorily asked the marquess's permission regardless, saying that he would take Lu Wancheng back to his family home to treat the young marquess's illness. The marquess of Nan'an knew that no one's therapeutic abilities rivalled those of Head Imperial Physician Lin, so he naturally agreed.

Thus, Lin Qingyu took Lu Wancheng, Huantong, and Hualu back to the Lin manor.

Since his return was spontaneous this time, his parents and younger brother were extremely surprised. Lin Qinghe still remembered Lu Wancheng, the elder brother-in-law he'd seen only once before, and said with childish innocence, "Wancheng-gege, you got so thin."

Lin Qingyu's mother froze, but Lu Wancheng smiled from his wheelchair. "And you grew so much, little Qinghe."

Lin Qinghe hid behind his mother shyly. His eyes resembled Lin Qingyu's quite a bit; they really were brothers. Looking at the boy cheered Lu Wancheng up, as if he were looking at a miniature version of Lin Qingyu.

Lady Lin heaved a sigh of relief and smiled. "You came at just the right time. If you were even a moment later, your father would already have left."

"What?" Lin Qingyu looked at his father. "Where are you going, Father?"

"Yongliang," his father said.

Yongliang was a city in the northwest of Great Yu. It bordered Western Xia, which had originally been Great Yu's satellite kingdom. Western Xia's power had recently grown, however, and treason began to brew. The nation wanted to leave Great Yu's control and replace the empire.

“The northwest border is currently embattled. Why go to Yong-liang now?” Lin Qingyu asked.

His father’s expression was grave. “Half a month ago, Great General Gu was unfortunately struck by a poisoned arrow during battle. Even after they removed the arrow, the poison stayed in his system, and neither the foremost physicians in Yongliang, nor those in the military, know what to do. The report said that Great General Gu grows weaker daily, and if this continues, he may not survive. His Majesty commanded me to travel to Yongliang immediately, without rest, in order to treat Great General Gu.”

Lu Wancheng himself was nearly dead; naturally, he didn’t care about someone else’s mortality. “Yongliang is so far from the capital. Even if you don’t rest at all, you’ll need at least a fortnight. Will you get there in time?”

Lin Qingyu’s father sighed. “I hope that someone as good as Great General Gu has the will of the heavens on his side.”

As a son, Lin Qingyu inwardly preferred that his father not travel to an area that was now war-torn. But as normal citizens, rather than dukes or princes, they only lived in this land, and they didn’t have any control over it. Since they resided in Great Yu, they would have to bow down to the emperor all their lives. And Great General Gu…was also someone worth saving.

“Please take care, Father,” said Lin Qingyu. “Be safe.”

Chapter 27

LIN QINGYU'S FATHER knew that his son hadn't brought his husband home over nothing, so he led the two to his study. After dismissing the servants who brought them tea, Lin Qingyu took a porcelain bottle from his sleeve, handing it to his father. "Father, do you recognize this incense?"

Father Lin uncorked the bottle and sniffed gently.

"It's solemn and heavy, rich and lingering," he said thoughtfully. "It's nine-tenths the same as Pursuing Phoenix, the incense unique to Fengyi Palace."

Lin Qingyu's father was the head imperial physician of the Department of Imperial Physicians. Although that position wasn't very powerful, he was still an important official to the emperor, considering that he personally looked after the emperor and empress's health. Every three days, he visited Fengyi Palace to pay his respects to the empress, so of course he was familiar with Pursuing Phoenix's scent.

Lin Qingyu smiled in resignation. "Only nine-tenths?"

"So the reason you're so busy lately is because you're trying to recreate the empress's incense…?" Lu Wancheng said. "But how long were you even in Fengyi Palace? Even recreating nine-tenths of the scent is impressive."

Lin Qingyu shook his head. "It's not sufficient." Incense and medicine were similar in many respects. He should be able to do better.

"You expect far too much of yourself. You can lower the bar a bit," Lu Wancheng coaxed. "If your standard for yourself was just that you live and let live, then couldn't you exist happily?"

Lin Qingyu's cold gaze swept over him. "Must you be so flippant at this moment?"

Lu Wancheng laughed. "All right, all right, I'm sorry. But don't glare at me in front of Father-in-Law. It makes me seem so low in the family's pecking order."

Lin Qingyu's father watched the two banter back and forth, finally understanding why Lu Wancheng was still alive today. In the end, Lin Qingyu had used the prescription his father had given him.

Lin Qingyu no longer wanted to look at a certain person. "Father," he said, "can you help me obtain samples of the usual incense burned in Fengyi Palace, Changle Palace, and the Eastern Palace?"

His father had been the head imperial physician of the Department of Imperial Physicians for a very long time. He had connections both within the department and in the Imperial Academy of Medicine, and he cared deeply about cultivating young people's talents. Every new physician at the department had once been guided and taught by him. Among those students was one who'd come from poverty but was righteous and hardworking. He'd taken that student under his wing and taught him everything he knew.

Inexperienced imperial physicians could only treat ladies-in-waiting and eunuchs, and thanks to his adeptness and friendliness, this student was extremely popular with both groups. Perhaps he could get what Lin Qingyu wanted from the

three palaces' ladies-in-waiting.

"I can try," his father said, "but what do you need them for?"

He had done his utmost as a doctor for his entire life. He would never agree to help his eldest son and his son-in-law murder the crown prince. And Lin Qingyu didn't want his family involved. Thus, he only said, "I have my own uses for it, Father. Please don't ask about it further."

His father looked worried. "Whatever you want to do, Qingyu, the politics of the palace are beyond you and me."

Lin Qingyu smiled. "Don't worry, Father. I know my limits."

His limits were very simple. He only wanted Xiao Cheng's life.

His father nodded and turned to Lu Wancheng. "You rarely visit, Young Marquess. May I ask to feel your pulse?"

Lu Wancheng held out his wrist. "My sincerest gratitude, Father-in-Law."

When taking someone's pulse, Lin Qingyu's father never showed any expression, happy or sad. As Lin Qingyu waited patiently, he suddenly felt a little nervous. He actually knew the current state of Lu Wancheng's health quite well. Regardless of his father's medical skill, this would only be a matter of whether Lu Wancheng could have more time.

He didn't need to be nervous. Whatever the result was, it would still be expected.

Lin Qingyu forced himself to calm down, and when his father drew back his hand, he asked casually, "How is he, Father?"

His father looked pointedly at Lin Qingyu. "Did you modify the prescription I gave you?"

"Yes. I changed the most vicious and toxic ingredients to the gentler kudzu root and sanqi ginseng. The changes shouldn't have affected the overall medicine too much."

"Kudzu root and sanqi ginseng are medicinally effective, but mixed with the other ingredients, I'm afraid…" Lin Qingyu's father trailed off and, politely, did not resume speaking.

Lu Wancheng shot Lin Qingyu a resentful glare. Now, even his father-in-law knew that he had erectile dysfunction. This was mortifying.

Thankfully, he didn't dwell on that topic. "Things are different than in the past. In the young marquess's current state, gentle medicines aren't enough to compensate for his body's illness. If you wish to extend his life further, you must use those more potent ingredients."

"What will happen if I take that more powerful medicine?" Lu Wancheng asked.

Father and son shared a glance. Neither spoke.

Lu Wancheng understood and smiled. "Let's not try that, then. I'm afraid of pain."

After a knock on the door, Lin Qinghe's young voice called from outside. "Daddy, Gege, Wancheng-gege, Mother says it's time for dinner."

Lin Qingyu opened the door. "Qinghe, push Wancheng-gege to the front hall."

“Is Qinghe strong enough to push me?” Lu Wancheng asked, deliberately teasing Lin Qinghe.

The boy nodded quickly. “I can, I can. I’m really strong.”

After the pair left, Lin Qingyu asked, “Is there really no other way, Father?”

His father heaved a long sigh. “Tell the marquess’s manor to organize his last rites as soon as possible. You’ll have no more than two months.”

Two months. Would that be long enough for them to take Xiao Cheng’s pathetic life?

Closing his eyes, Lin Qingyu found himself replying, “I understand.”

Lu Wancheng ate dinner with the Lin family of four. Since the young marquess was ill, Lin Qingyu’s mother specifically instructed the cooks to prepare lots of light dishes that were easy to digest. Lin Qingyu’s father would go to Yongliang the next day, so this meal was also his farewell gathering.

Lu Wancheng was seemingly in a good mood. His lips curved up in a smile, and he helped himself repeatedly to food from the table. Each time, he only put a bit on his plate, but soon half the plate was full.

Lin Qingyu knew that Lu Wancheng could hardly stomach anything but porridge at this point. He was taking food solely because he didn’t want to disappoint everyone.

Yet the reality was the most disappointing thing. Otherwise, why wouldn’t he have an appetite, presented with his favorite foods?

During the dinner, Lin Qingyu’s father spoke of his student in the Department of Imperial Physicians. “I’ve already sent a servant to his home and asked him to come here tomorrow. Let him know what you need.”

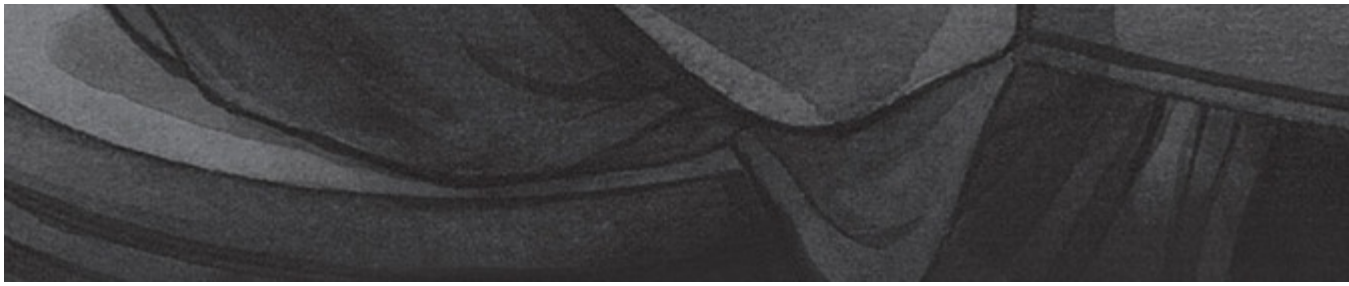
Lin Qingyu nodded. “All right.”

“Qingyu,” his mother said quietly, signaling him to look at Lu Wancheng.

Lu Wancheng sat in his wheelchair, head tilted slightly to one side, eyes closed, expression peaceful…and still holding silver chopsticks in his hand.

The Lin family exchanged looks and set down their chopsticks simultaneously. “Wancheng-gege?” Lin Qinghe called cautiously.

Lin Qingyu motioned for his younger brother to be quiet. “He’s only asleep,” he said softly.



He'd traveled by carriage from the marquess of Nan'an's manor to the Lin's, then conversed with everyone for ages… Lu Wancheng would only have fallen asleep at a family dinner if he was truly exhausted.

Lin Qingyu summoned Huantong and Hualu. "Take the young marquess back to his room to rest."

"Which room do you mean, Young Master?" Huantong asked.

Lin Qingyu didn't understand.

"Your room has already been cleaned for your visit, Qingyu," Lady Lin said. "But will the young marquess room with you, or…?"

Lin Qingyu hesitated, then said, "He'll be fine in a guest room."

There was a reason why Lin Qingyu had sacrificed his own comfort at the marquess's manor, squeezing onto the divan in Lu Wancheng's room. Since he was home now, they weren't obligated to sleep together.

As for why he'd slept in Lu Wancheng's room in the first place, that had initially been to shut Lady Liang up, and later…later, he supposed it had become a habit, and thus he didn't bother moving out. It wasn't a *good* habit, but it had lasted nearly a year.

Lin Qingyu told Huantong and Hualu to watch over Lu Wancheng in the guest room, then headed to his own chamber. He'd slept in that bedroom for as long as he could remember—well, until he put on his wedding robes and married into the marquess's manor.

The room was spotless, and every item was exactly as he remembered. But he kept feeling as though something was missing. Between the bed and the divan, there should have been a screen painted with mandarin ducks playing in the water…

Lin Qingyu stopped the thought. He blew out the candle and went to bed alone.

Early the next morning, Lin Qingyu's father bade farewell to his wife and sons, then left for Yongliang with a few guards from the Gu family. No one roused Lu Wancheng, but he awoke on his own. In fact, he woke even earlier than Lin Qingyu and paid his respects to his father-in-law in private, then sent him off alongside the Lin family.

"Why did you wake up so early today?" asked Lin Qingyu.

"Because I fell asleep early yesterday, I think," Lu Wancheng said casually. "Isn't it good if I wake up early? Otherwise you'll complain that I sleep too much."

Lin Qingyu paused briefly. "Not anymore. You can sleep as long as you want."

Lu Wancheng squinted as he watched the sunrise. He hadn't seen it in a long time. "There will be plenty of time to sleep later. Losing some sleep now isn't a big deal."

Lin Qingyu stood beside the wheelchair for a while, watching the sun with Lu Wancheng, then suggested, "Let's go inside."

Lin Qinghe had reached the age for schooling, so he usually had to go to classes in the mornings. Because Lin Qingyu rarely came home, however, his mother had excused her younger son for a few days to let the brothers reunite. Unfortunately, she didn't realize that Lin Qinghe wasn't having a relaxing time with his older brother at all; he still had to recite passages and write characters.

Lu Wancheng looked at the two brothers working hard and picked up a brush himself, writing and drawing on some paper out of sheer boredom.

After listening to Lin Qinghe recite his passages, Lin Qingyu looked up at Lu Wancheng, who was yawning and holding a brush lengthwise in his fingers. Meeting his gaze, Lu Wancheng began to twirl the brush—then stopped and casually took a dangly hairpin from inside his robes, twirling it with familiarity.

Lin Qinghe gazed at him in wonder, tugging Lin Qingyu's sleeve. "Gege, I want to learn how to do that."

"No," Lin Qingyu said coldly.

Lin Qinghe was clearly disappointed. Lu Wancheng winked at him. "Don't worry. I'll teach you in secret later."

Lin Qingyu didn't know what he could say to that.

Soon, Lin Qingyu's mother sent an auntie to ask the three young masters to keep working hard—but also tell them that she'd made a few desserts. Lin Qinghe looked at his older brother with puppy-dog eyes. "Can I take a break, Gege?"

"Go ahead." Lin Qingyu smiled slightly.

Lin Qinghe happily went, holding the auntie's hand.

"Aren't you going to have dessert?" Lu Wancheng asked.

Lin Qingyu lowered his head, checking the characters that Lin Qinghe had just written. "I'm not hungry."

Lu Wancheng looked at him for a while. "Do I need to sleep in the guest room again tonight, Qingyu?"

Lin Qingyu's heart lurched. "Are you not sleeping well in the guest room?"

"Well, no," Lu Wancheng said slowly. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Huantong called from outside the room, "Young Master, Imperial Physician Hu is here." Imperial Physician Hu was his father's student.

"Show him to the front hall and tell him to wait just a moment." Although this visit was urgent, Lin Qingyu still remembered that it was time for Lu Wancheng to take his medicine. "Push the young marquess back to his room for his medicine, Huantong."

Lu Wancheng gazed at Lin Qingyu's hastily retreating figure, his expression complicated, as Huantong approached him. "Let me push you back to the room, Young Marquess."

Lu Wancheng stayed silent for a long time. Suddenly, he gave a curt laugh and asked in a quiet voice, "Huantong, what should I do if I'm a bit sad?"

Huantong didn't understand. "Why are you sad?"

Lu Wancheng thought for a bit, then said uncertainly, "Because it seems like… I'm the only one who's not used to this."

Chapter 28

IN THE FRONT HALL of the Lin manor, Lin Qingyu saw his father's student, Hu Ji.

Hu Ji came from poverty, and back when he'd studied at the Imperial Academy of Medicine, he'd eaten only one meal a day; he didn't have money for more. Once, teaching a class at the Imperial Academy of Medicine, Lin Qingyu's father had seen Hu Ji in a corner of the room, desperately gulping water to stave off his hunger. Lin Qingyu's father had pitied him and immediately given him a job as a library janitor. Hu Ji only completed his studies successfully thanks to the meager sum of money that he'd earned from that job each month. Then he'd entered the Department of Imperial Physicians and been taken into the tutelage of Lin Qingyu's father, who nurtured him and was no less than paternal to him. However difficult they might be, Hu Ji would never ignore any of Father Lin's requests.

After some small talk, Hu Ji took two incense boxes from his briefcase. "The red incense blend is Pursuing Phoenix, which the empress burns. The beige blend is Plum and Willow, used by Noble Consort Chen. As for the crown prince, he isn't in the habit of burning incense."

Lin Qingyu took the boxes and smelled each. "Have you studied incense, Imperial Physician Hu?"

"I only know a little bit," Hu Ji said humbly.

"In your opinion, what is the quality of these two incense blends?"

"They're used by royals in the palace, so naturally, they must be top quality. Pursuing Phoenix has a calming, soothing effect and supports longevity, while Plum and Willow can open pressure points and calm the blood. Both formulas are secrets of the palace and, unless the emperor bestows the incense upon someone, no one can burn it of their own accord." As Hu Ji spoke, fear appeared in his eyes. "Miss Yunxiu, a maid from Fengyi Palace, and Xiaokuanzi, a eunuch from Changle Palace, risked everything to steal these samples. I hope they help you, Young Master Lin."

Lin Qingyu reflected for a moment, then asked Hu Ji something again. "Why doesn't the crown prince burn incense?"

"The crown prince fought for the throne, and he personally witnessed the third prince die from poisoning. He's extremely careful about his food and other daily items. According to the ladies from the kitchens, all the food supplied to the Eastern Palace comes from a small kitchen within that palace. Nothing ever goes through anyone else."

"I understand," Lin Qingyu said. "Thank you very much, Imperial Physician Hu."

"Don't mention it, Young Master Lin," Hu Ji said quickly. "Head Imperial Physician Lin reshaped my life. It's my honor to be able to help his son."

Lin Qingyu's father had saved more than just one person in his time. Lin Qingyu sometimes wondered how people as kind as his parents could have produced someone as evil as him.

Finding Lu Wancheng in the guest room, Lin Qingyu showed him the two boxes of incense that Hu Ji had brought.

"Is anything wrong with those types of incense?" Lu Wancheng asked.

"No. But medical theory says that one can produce strong poisons by combining healing herbs. I think that incense may work in the same way."

Xiao Cheng wasn't as accessible Lu Qiaosong. As Hu Ji had said, every single item sent to the Eastern Palace was scrutinized closely. An incense like the one he'd formulated previously would never make it into the palace… Unless he sent something that looked harmless but reacted with items that Xiao Cheng encountered frequently, formed a poison, and subtly, slowly but surely, corroded Xiao Cheng's body.

"As I guessed, the truth of the universe is that if you're good at math and science—especially chemistry—you can do anything," Lu Wancheng couldn't help exclaiming.

"That truth is useless right now." Lin Qingyu rubbed his forehead lightly. "Xiao Cheng doesn't burn incense. Even if he did, we can't get anything into the Eastern Palace anyway."

Lu Wancheng toyed with the dangly hairpin that Lin Qingyu had given him. "We can't send any objects in, but can we send a person?"

Lin Qingyu immediately understood what he meant. "To do that, we'd need an opportunity."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "I'll go find the opportunity—you're responsible for finding the catalyst. When sworn broth…husband and wife are of the same mind, they can overcome any hardship."

The corners of Lin Qingyu's lips curved up. "Very well… Oh, right." Recalling something, he summoned Huantong. "Switch out the divan in my room for a small bed."

Lu Wancheng froze. "Qingyu?"

Lin Qingyu gave him the justification that he'd already prepared. "Right now, anything could happen to you at any point. You need someone beside you at all times. Hualu is a girl, and Huantong can be too careless. After mulling it over, I've decided that it's best to keep you next to me."

"Young Master?" Huantong exclaimed in disbelief.

Lu Wancheng's smile slowly blossomed, and his eyes seemed full of hope as he gazed at Lin Qingyu. "When we return to the manor, then, let's swap the divan there for a bed too. Or rather, let's just hire a carpenter to make a new bed." Lu Wancheng gestured, raising and lowering his arm. "A bunk bed. I'll sleep on the bottom, and you'll sleep on the top…"

Lin Qingyu pictured the setup, his expression complicated.

Huantong couldn't help thinking, *The young marquess is sure besotted.*

***

Lin Qingyu dove into studying incense; he smelled like a different type each day. The subject of incense was incredibly complicated. Although Lin Qingyu had a background in medical theory, it wouldn't be easy to understand all the nuances in such a short time.

The two men stayed at Lin Qingyu's home for a few days. Then news came from the palace that the emperor wanted to select concubines for the crown prince.

Duke Wen had apparently brought this up first. He held that since the crown prince was already twenty years old, he had long since reached the age to take a wife and concubines.

Three years earlier, the empress dowager died. At that point, the crown prince had only just moved into the Eastern Palace, and the requirement that he keep vigil had delayed any marriage plans. Now that the vigil period had passed, it was again time to seriously discuss his marriage.

The crown prince's wife would be the future empress. Thus, choosing a wife should be a careful procedure and couldn't be rushed. However, choosing one or two concubines for the crown prince now would be appropriate. Those concubines would be in charge of the Eastern Palace's internal affairs, shouldering some of the crown prince's burdens. The emperor fully endorsed this plan and delegated the concubines' selection to the empress.

Although only concubines, they would be the crown prince's first partners of significant status. They would be ranked noble consorts at the lowest, so they couldn't be just anyone. Appearance, background, and other details had to be carefully considered. After an abundance of careful consideration, the empress delivered a list of names to the emperor. Among the names was that of the marquess of Nan'an's eldest daughter, Lu Niantao.

The noblewomen on the list all had their own strengths, but in the end, they were prospective concubines for the crown prince. Therefore, the emperor wanted the crown prince to choose by himself.

When this news reached the marquess's manor, Lu Niantao was both overjoyed and worried. She was joyful because if the crown prince took notice of her, her and her mother's hardships would be over. But she was worried—she'd once met the crown prince in Fengyi Palace, but he hadn't even looked at her. Instead, he'd focused all his attention on Lin Qingyu. How could she stand out from all those other rich, noble girls with ease? Thankfully, she and Lady Liang had long been prepared and had secretly sent gifts to Changle Palace.

The eunuchs around Noble Consort Chen had given out that ever since the emperor caught cold during the autumn hunt, his health had oscillated between good and bad. To show his filial piety, the crown prince copied three hundred Buddhist prayers, and he was preparing to ceremonially burn them at Changsheng Temple, endeavoring to restore the emperor's health.

Xiaokuanzi of Changle Palace had told Hu Ji about that development as well, and Hu Ji in turn told Lin Qingyu. When Lu Wancheng heard, he said only one word: "Connections."

Aside from the influx of visitors coming to burn incense, Changsheng Temple was quite cool and isolated in late autumn. Geese were flying south, the wind was chilly, and all the leaves were falling.

Lin Qingyu helped Lu Wancheng out of their carriage, and Huantong brought his wheelchair. A young monk walked toward them, his hands folded in prayer. “Young Marquess Lu, Young Lord Lin, you’ve had a difficult journey.”

It seemed as though he’d been waiting for a while.

“You knew we would be coming?” Lin Qingyu asked.

The monk smiled. “You overestimate me, Young Lord Lin. The imperial preceptor told me that important guests would visit Changsheng Temple today, and that I should greet them.”

Lu Wancheng and Lin Qingyu glanced at each other. “By ‘important guests,’ are you sure the imperial preceptor meant *us*?”

The monk only smiled without speaking, extending a hand. The three followed him through the main temple to the back hill.

“Speaking of guests,” the monk said, “Lady Liang and Young Lady Lu are also visiting our temple today. They should be reciting Buddhist texts in the temple right now. Would you like to greet them, Young Lord Lin?”

“I take it the imperial preceptor is only receiving the young marquess,” Lin Qingyu said mildly.

The youthful monk bowed. “My apologies, Young Lord Lin.”

They’d come to Changsheng Temple today to ensure that Xiao Cheng and Lu Niantao met, and Lin Qingyu didn’t want the imperial preceptor to appear last-minute and mess up their plan. “Wancheng?”

“Go ahead,” Lu Wancheng said. “I’ll go see what that Half-Immortal Xu has in mind now.”

After they’d separated from Lin Qingyu, the monk led Lu Wancheng and Huantong to a meditation room. “Young Marquess Lu, please go ahead. Master Huantong, please wait with me in front of the door.”

Sandalwood incense burned within the meditation room, and swirling smoke filled the space. Great Yu’s imperial preceptor, Xu Junyuan, stood with his hands behind his back. At first glance, he looked like an immortal who belonged above the clouds.

“Young Marquess Lu.” Xu Junyuan turned around and smiled serenely. “It’s been a while. How have you been?”

“How have I been…?” Lu Wancheng laughed shortly. “How do you think I’ve been?”

“You have, in fact, grown much thinner since I last saw you during April’s Qingming Festival, Young Marquess.”

“Please don’t mince words, Imperial Preceptor. A terminally ill person’s time is particularly valuable, and I don’t want to waste it on purposeless things.”

Xu Junyuan laughed. “Your mindset seems to have changed quite a bit, Young Marquess. When I last saw you, I saw someone who’d ascended beyond life and death—someone who certainly wouldn’t have minded speaking further with me.”

But since he now had someone and something he cared about, his time had gained a purpose. He at least couldn’t die before Xiao Cheng did.

Lu Wancheng smiled. “Farewell.”

“About your fate…” Xu Junyuan continued immediately. “However many calculations I perform using the name ‘Lu Wancheng,’ and his birth date, they always conclude at the final month of this year.” He shook his head and sighed. “A pity.”

Lu Wancheng looked at Xu Junyuan for a long time, as if wanting to read his mind. “The book said that Imperial Preceptor Xu had some real skills.”

“Oh?” Xu Junyuan raised his eyebrows. “Dare I ask what book you speak of, Young Marquess?”

Lu Wancheng didn’t answer. He wheeled himself to the desk and picked up a brush, then wrote ten words on some paper. “Please divine this individual’s fate, Imperial Preceptor.”

An hour later, Xu Junyuan personally pushed Lu Wancheng’s wheelchair to the back room, returning him to Lin Qingyu. He was just about to leave when Lu Wancheng called, “How certain are you of what you just told me, Imperial Preceptor?”

“Completely certain, should the will of the universe remain the same,” Xu Junyuan replied vaguely. “But if the universe wills something different, what can we do about it?”

Lu Wancheng laughed. “I expected no more of the imperial preceptor. I’d rather read more books than listen to you.”

Xu Junyuan let out a hearty laugh and strolled away.

“What did he say to you?” Lin Qingyu asked.

Lu Wancheng hesitated briefly. “I’ll tell you later. How are Lady Liang and Lu Niantao?”

“They…”

Spotting people approaching from far away, Lu Wancheng abruptly cut him off. “You must dislike Xiao Cheng immensely, right, Qingyu?”

Lin Qingyu looked askance at him. “Do you even need to ask?”

A bit bashfully, Lu Wancheng smiled. “Then if you had to be kissed by a man, would you choose to be kissed by Xiao Cheng or me?”

Just the words ‘by Xiao Cheng’ turned Lin Qingyu’s stomach. He couldn’t even bear to look at Lu Wancheng at that point, but when he remembered that Lu Wancheng didn’t have long left to live, he tried his best to hold back his temper. “I wouldn’t choose either,” he said as calmly as he could.

“Come on. Just choose one.” Lu Wancheng wouldn’t give up. “It’s hypothetical anyway.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t see the point of this question. Did Lu Wancheng really want to hear him say “I’d choose you”?

“I’d choose to die,” he said instead.

“Qingyu…” Lu Wancheng whined.

“Fine, fine. I’d choose you,” Lin Qingyu begrudgingly said. “Will you stop with this now?”

Summoning a burst of strength from nowhere, Lu Wancheng managed to stand up from his wheelchair.

“You said it yourself, okay?” he told Lin Qingyu with a smile.

Suddenly, Lin Qingyu felt an arm tighten around his waist—Lu Wancheng’s arm. The familiar scent of sandalwood incense entered his nose, and he didn’t have time to react before he saw Lu Wancheng’s head lower toward him.

Lin Qingyu abruptly returned to his senses and placed his hand against the other man’s chest, about to push him away. If he did so with all his strength, however, Lu Wancheng might actually die.

Then Lu Wancheng whispered in his ear, “Someone’s looking.”

Someone’s looking? Lin Qingyu understood what he meant. He gradually pushed Lu Wancheng less forcefully, eventually changing his position to embrace him. As his arms wrapped around Lu Wancheng’s shoulders, he closed his eyes.

Long eyelashes swept over the tip of Lu Wancheng’s nose, tickling him. His lips barely brushed Lin Qingyu’s cheek as they passed it.

This was a fake kiss—just for show.

After a long time, Lin Qingyu felt Lu Wancheng straighten up, and he slowly opened his eyes. Not even his long, delicate lashes hid the anxiousness in his eyes, and Lu Wancheng’s breath caught in his throat.

Lin Qingyu steadied himself. “Was it him?” he asked in a low voice.

“Qingyu,” Lu Wancheng said slowly, “I feel like something’s wrong.”

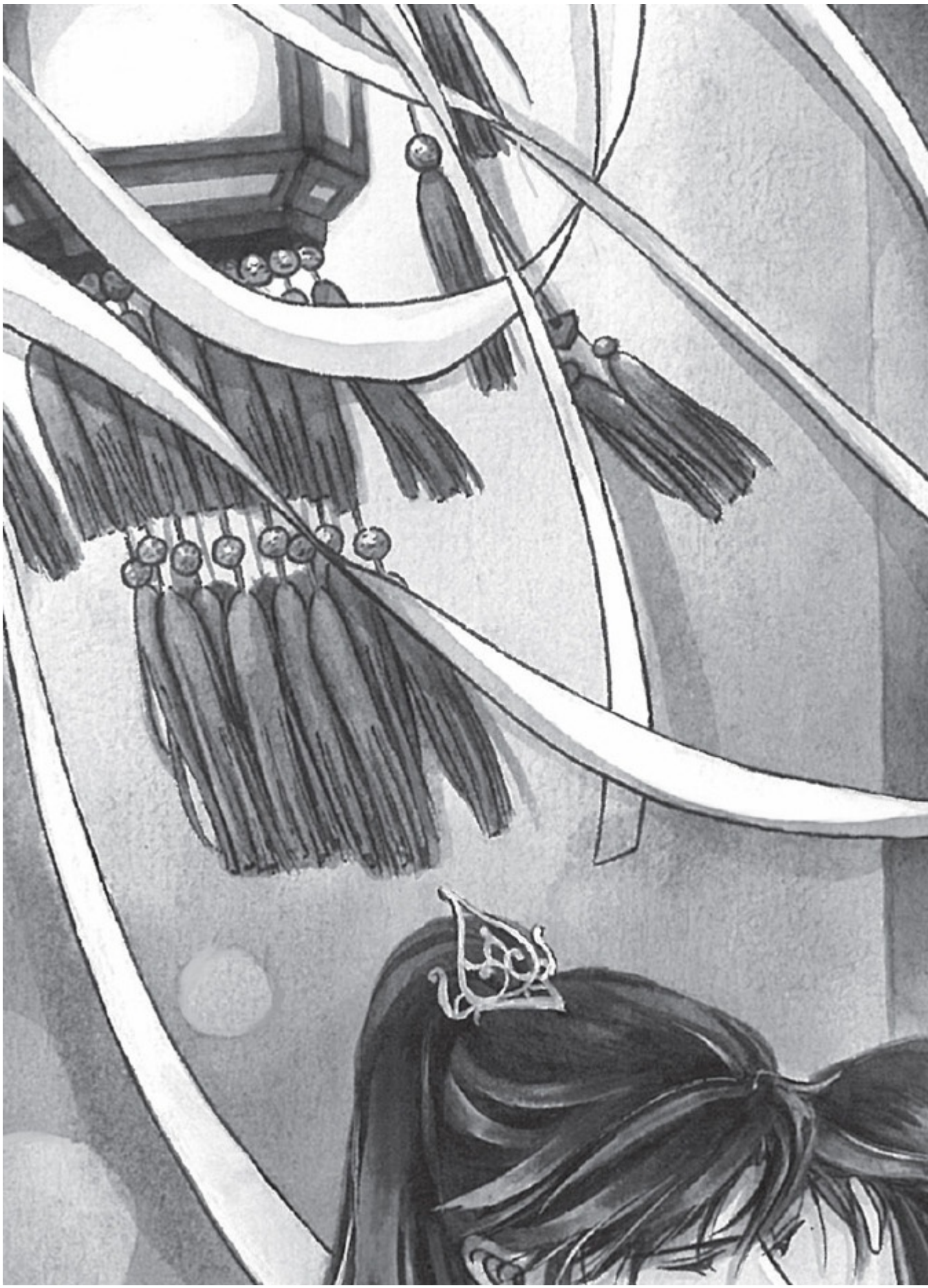
“What?”

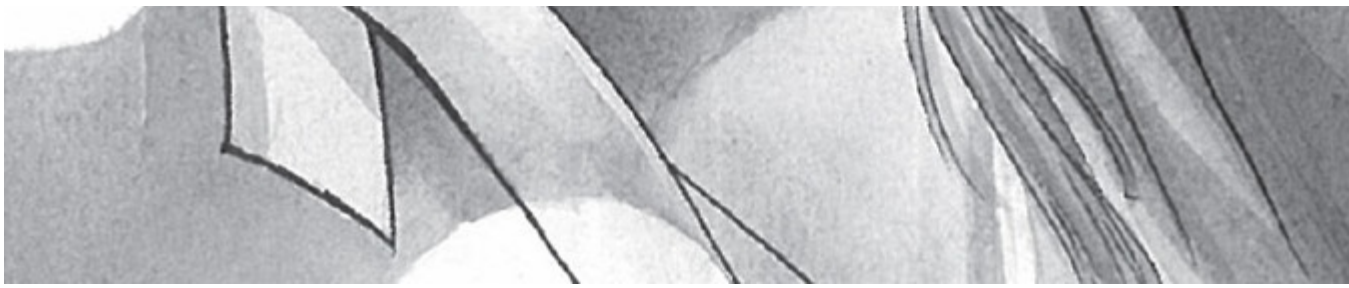
“My heart’s racing, and I can’t breathe…”

Lu Wancheng was already swaying on his feet. Instinctively, Lin Qingyu reached out and pulled him closer. “Wancheng?”

They nearly toppled over together, but thankfully Lin Qingyu’s knee touched the ground first and steadied them.

Lu Wancheng’s face was pale, but his ears were oddly red. He knew that he was about to faint, but he had something to say before passing out. Grabbing Lin Qingyu’s collar, he used the last of his strength to choke out the words, “Don’t do a princess carry…”





Then his head lolled to the side, and he fainted in Lin Qingyu's arms.

Lin Qingyu truly had no words.

Huantong had come to find his young masters, and when he witnessed the scene, he thought that the young marquess had succumbed to his illness.

"Young Master!" he exclaimed in panic. "What's wrong with the young marquess?!"

As he finished feeling Lu Wancheng's pulse, Lin Qingyu didn't know what expression to wear. "He's just too weak, and he can't take any excitement. He's fainted for the moment, but he's basically all right. We just need to wait for him to come to."

Huantong immediately asked a question that got at the truth: "But given his personality, what could the young marquess have gotten so excited about?"

Lin Qingyu's face burned slightly. "Who knows?" he said as calmly as he could. "But please carry him on your back to rest in that back room."

After Huantong carried Lu Wancheng away, Lin Qingyu asked coldly, "Since Your Highness is already here, what's the point in hiding?"

Chapter 29

"HA. YOU AND THE young marquess certainly acted out an entertaining scene for me."

Lin Qingyu heard the voice before he saw the person speaking.

The newcomer had long eyebrows that nearly reached his sideburns. His eyes were long and narrow, and his thin lips curled up slightly. He was clearly a beautiful man, but his "I know I'm stunning" facial expression made him inexplicably repellent. After taking only one look at him, Lin Qingyu had the urge to throw him into the icy pond and rinse off his grease.

Lin Qingyu bowed courteously. "Your Highness."

"Since we're outside the palace, you needn't greet me so formally, Young Lord Lin." Even as he spoke, Xiao Cheng never moved his gaze from Lin Qingyu's face. "Lift your head and look at me."

Lin Qingyu hid the coldness in his eyes before raising them to meet Xiao Cheng's gaze directly. Xiao Cheng looked piercingly at him, nostalgia and yearning rising in his stare.

"I haven't seen these eyes in so long," he murmured.

"Is Your Highness speaking of Princess Jingchun's eyes?" asked Lin Qingyu.

That abruptly awoke Xiao Cheng from his trance, and emotion retreated like the tide from his gaze. "Did Lu Wancheng tell you that?" he demanded icily. "How did he know…?"

"It seems the young marquess was correct. Your Highness still loves Princess Jingchun and only noticed me because I resemble her in some way."

Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes. "I didn't think that a frail, bedridden good-for-nothing like Lu Wancheng would know so much," he said cruelly. "It's a pity that, however much he knows, he's just a weakling waiting for death. Even a kiss can knock him out." The crown prince licked his lips. "It truly defies the will of the universe for a beauty like Young Lord Lin to be with *him*."

A beauty. That was surely a compliment. But when the word came out of Xiao Cheng's mouth, Lin Qingyu just wanted to cut out his tongue.

"Beauty?" Lin Qingyu laughed mirthlessly. "If I didn't have these eyes or this mole, would Your Highness still think I was beautiful?"

"There's no need for you to deprecate yourself, Young Lord Lin. Your looks are rare in this world. Even if Jingchun hadn't existed, I would've fallen in love with you at first sight." Xiao Cheng approached Lin Qingyu. He was tall and broad; his shadow could envelop Lin Qingyu completely. "Xiao-Qingyu, why didn't you drink the wine I offered you last time? Hm?"

Lin Qingyu stepped backward. "I am wedded. It's surely inappropriate for Your Highness to flirt with me like this."

"Flirt? You think I'm flirting with you?" Xiao Cheng leaned in even closer, his voice low and hoarse. "Then…do you feel your heart beating for me?"

Not in *that* way, but the urge to poison and kill the crown prince had increased tenfold. *Can't this piece of shit get out of my sight?*

Xiao Cheng noticed the lingering fragrance on Lin Qingyu's body, and his tongue poked the inside of his cheek. "Xiao-Qingyu, you smell so good…"

Lin Qingyu didn't want to stay a moment longer. "My marriage to the young marquess was proposed by the empress and permitted by the emperor. Isn't Your Highness disrespecting them by acting so out of line?"

Xiao Cheng froze, and much of the arrogance in his eyes disappeared. Then his lips curled in a smile as he eyed Lin Qingyu. "No matter. Lu Wancheng won't live long, anyway. I'm patient."

"I'll go take care of my husband, then." Lin Qingyu's expression was cool. "My apologies for being unable to stay."

"Xiao-Qingyu," Xiao Cheng called, one side of his mouth quirking into something that did not quite resemble a smile. "One day, I'll have you lie beneath me—willingly. I'll wait for you."

Lin Qingyu turned and strode along the walkway. He spotted a plain white skirt vanishing around the corner and glanced back at the confident Xiao Cheng.

"Don't wait for me," he muttered to himself. "Wait for death to befall you instead."

A Changsheng Temple monk with medical skills had performed acupuncture on Lu Wancheng. By the time Lin Qingyu found him in the back room, Lu Wancheng had already woken up; he held a bowl containing a calming tonic and was taking small sips from it. Huantong stood to the side, watching over the young marquess. When he saw Lin Qingyu walk in, he said, "Young Master, you're here."

Lu Wancheng froze in the middle of drinking his medicine, then smiled like nothing had happened. "Qingyu."

Others might feel awkward—that was fine, as long as *he* didn't.

"You, just now…" Lin Qingyu said slowly.

Fuck. It was still really awkward.

Burying his face in his hands, Lu Wancheng explained feebly, "I swear I'm not a loser. This body is just too weak."

He could admit that he'd overexerted himself looking at such a beauty, and that his heart had started beating a little too quickly—but fainting on the spot *was* a bit too dramatic, wasn't it? Frustrated and embarrassed, he added, "In the past, I could've run eight hundred meters carrying you without breaking a sweat."

Lin Qingyu silently watched him brag.

Lu Wancheng seemed genuinely hurt by the other man's impassiveness. His head drooped. "Really. Just believe me once more, Qingyu."

To comfort his patient, Lin Qingyu said half-heartedly, "I believe you."

"Really?" Lu Wancheng asked doubtfully.

"Yes."

A smile spread across Lu Wancheng's face. The young man's smile was as clean and bright as the blue sky after a summer storm, cleansing Lin Qingyu's grease-

blurred eyes.

Having recovered his self-respect, Lu Wancheng finally remembered their plan. “Oh, right—did you see Xiao Cheng?”

“I did,” Lin Qingyu scoffed coldly. “He called me ‘Xiao-Qingyu.’”

“…Help me.”

When Lu Wancheng had recovered adequately, Lin Qingyu told Huantong to pack their things and prepare to return to the manor.

When they reached the main temple, Huantong saw the monk who’d performed Lu Wancheng’s acupuncture. “Young Master, this is the master who revived the young marquess.”

The monk met their eyes and nodded in greeting.

As Lu Wancheng’s main wife, Lin Qingyu felt obligated to thank the monk personally, so he told Huantong and Lu Wancheng to wait a bit. He’d heard long ago that Buddhist physicians used different medical techniques than other physicians. After Lin Qingyu thanked him, the monk asked about Lu Wancheng’s health, and Lin Qingyu told him some things.

Outside, Huantong was bored. Watching visitors burn incense, kneel, and pray, he suggested, “Young Marquess, why don’t we offer some incense to the Buddha too?”

“Sure,” Lu Wancheng said casually.

Huantong asked a monk for six incense sticks, lit them, and gave three to Lu Wancheng. Then he imitated the guests by kneeling on the cushion, holding the incense between his palms, and murmuring to himself. After that, he prostrated himself three times to the statue of the Buddha and stuck his incense sticks into the burner.

After doing all this, Huantong stood and dusted off his clothes. When he saw that the young marquess still held his incense indifferently, looking toward the young lord and the monk, Huantong knelt again. “Your health doesn’t allow for kneeling, Young Marquess, so I’ll kneel and prostrate myself to the Buddha in your stead.”

Afterward, he said, “Young Marquess, you can tell the Buddha your wishes now.”

Lu Wancheng looked away from the monk and young lord. “My wishes?”

“Yeah. As long as the Buddha hears those, he’ll definitely help us achieve them.”

Lu Wancheng sat in his wheelchair, looking at the golden Buddha in the great temple. The statue was solemn and auspicious-looking, gazing down upon all of humanity.

Lu Wancheng thought for a bit and looked toward Lin Qingyu. “Then…I wish for him to be happy forever.”

***

Lin Qingyu’s carriage had just stopped in front of the marquess’s manor when Lady Liang and Lu Niantao’s carriage arrived as well. When Lady Liang

disembarked and saw Lin Qingyu, she instinctively wanted to hide, but Lu Niantao grabbed her arm. “You are the main wife of the manor, Mother, and he’s merely the young lord. You still need to keep up your image.”

Lady Liang balled her fists and feigned a smile. “Wancheng, Qingyu, where have you been? Why didn’t you tell me where you were going?”

Lu Wancheng’s expression was dark. “I’d rather we hadn’t gone and experienced such a thing,” he said angrily.

Lin Qingyu reached for the wheelchair, pursing his lips, but Lu Wancheng said, “Huantong, push me back.”

“Oh,” said Huantong, utterly confused. He looked at Lu Wancheng, then at Lin Qingyu, and pushed Lu Wancheng away. Lin Qingyu stood in silence for a while before following.

The other servants could only glance at each other furtively. Everyone knew that the gentlest person in the entire manor was Eldest Young Master. He treated everyone well, giving them the benefit of the doubt, and he never held grudges. This was the first time they’d ever seen him treat the young lord with such coldness.

Lady Liang was also perplexed. “Don’t they always get along? What’s the matter?”

“This is only happening *because* they get along,” Lu Niantao explained. “As weak as Eldest Brother is, he’s still a man. How could he stand to see someone else desire his wife? Even if the other person was…”

Lu Niantao felt both boastful and oddly jealous. What use was such a beautiful face on a man? If she had such a face, she wouldn’t need to put so much effort into getting others to like her.

That night, Lu Wancheng and Lin Qingyu had a huge fight, turning Lanfeng Pavilion inside out and upside down. When others passed the pavilion gate, they could even hear things being hurled to the ground.

Lu Wancheng pointed at Lin Qingyu and gnashed out from between his teeth, “Answer me—did you or didn’t you make plans to secretly meet him at Changsheng Temple today?!”

Lin Qingyu tried to reason with him. “If I’d made plans with him beforehand, why would I have brought you there?”

“Do you think I’m stupid just because I’m ill?”

“Yes.”

“You never wear incense, so why did you put on a scented sachet today to visit the temple?”

“On a whim. I didn’t know he’d like it.”

“Ha!” Lu Wancheng scoffed, saying sarcastically, “You must really want me to die as early as possible so that you can choose a second husband of even higher status.”

“If you really want to think that way, I can’t do anything about it,” Lin Qingyu said calmly.

“You…” Lu Wancheng choked. Lin Qingyu waited for him to resume yelling, but Lu Wancheng lowered his voice and continued, “You can’t say that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t say anything good back.”

“Then let’s stop arguing for now,” Lin Qingyu said, flailing an arm. Everything on the table crashed to the floor.

Lu Wancheng smiled and picked up a vase on a shelf, about to dash it to the ground, when Lin Qingyu said, “That’s an antique from a past dynasty.”

Lu Wancheng put the vase back immediately. “It’ll be part of your inheritance, then.”

The next day, the room was a total mess. Hualu and a few other servants had to clean all morning just to throw out everything the men had ruined. Among the items was the scented sachet that Xiao Cheng had taken an interest in.

Winter hadn’t yet arrived, and the chrysanthemums were in full bloom. Charcoal-burning braziers were already in use in Lanfeng Pavilion, and curtains hung from the doors to block the wind.

In the study, Lin Qingyu read the letters that Zhang Shiquan had mailed from Xu Prefecture, iciness rising in his eyes. When he finished, he wrote a reply of only three words: *Continue to search.*

“Young Master, Young Master!” Huantong ran inside noisily. “The young marquess wants you to return to the bedroom. He says he has something really good to show you.”

“What is it?” Lin Qingyu asked suspiciously.

Huantong smiled. “You’ll see when you go.”

Lin Qingyu walked into the bedroom to find that the divan he’d been sleeping on had disappeared. The screen and Lu Wancheng’s bed were gone as well. One bed atop another—the bunk bed that Lu Wancheng had mentioned—had replaced them.

Lu Wancheng was talking to the carpenter. “Add a railing here on the top bunk to prevent the young lord from falling out during the night.”

“A detail I’d expect of the meticulous young marquess,” the carpenter responded. “I’ll add it now.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t say anything. He should’ve known that Lu Wancheng wasn’t going to give up on that idea.

“You’re here, Qingyu.” Lu Wancheng moved out of the way to show Lin Qingyu the entire masterpiece. “What do you think? Look at these steps. I specifically told the carpenter to make them wide so that you’d have an easier time climbing up and down.”

Lin Qingyu opened his mouth to argue, but relented when he noticed how Lu Wancheng’s heavy clothes and loose sleeve hung off his thin wrist. “As long as you like it.”

Although the custom-made bunk was a bit annoying to climb up to and down from, it was fairly comfortable to sleep in.

Lin Qingyu had just barely fallen asleep when, in a haze, he heard someone call his name.

He opened his eyes. The sky outside was still dark. Lu Wancheng stood by the bunk bed, both hands holding the railing, watching Lin Qingyu with a smile.

Lin Qingyu was still sleep-addled, making his voice a bit warmer and softer than usual. “What time is it?”

“Just after midnight.”

Lin Qingyu had assumed that Lu Wancheng woke him in the middle of the night because he didn’t feel well. But the young marquess could stand on his own, and his voice was steady, so that wasn’t it.

Lin Qingyu felt lazy just then—a rare mood—so he didn’t sit up. Instead, he turned onto his side and met Lu Wancheng’s eyes. “What did you want to do, to wake me up at this hour?”

In the dark night, Lu Wancheng’s eyes sparkled like stars. “Qingyu, I’m eighteen today.”

Chapter 30

FOR A MOMENT, Lin Qingyu didn't know what Lu Wancheng was talking about. *He's eighteen today?* Going from Lu Wancheng's birth date, he'd long passed the age of eighteen and was close to turning twenty. The person turning eighteen wasn't Lu Wancheng, then. It could only be…*him*.

Eighteen was just a birthday. The number wasn't even a multiple of ten years. Even if it had been his own birthday, Lin Qingyu wouldn't have cared, and he certainly wouldn't have waited until midnight to wake someone up. In the past, he would likely have shooed Lu Wancheng back to the bottom bunk, rolled over, and continued to sleep. But Lu Wancheng's eyes were so clear and sparkling, as if he'd waited in excitement for this moment for a long time just to share this secret with Lin Qingyu.

Lin Qingyu sat up, pulled his slightly messy long hair behind his shoulders, and climbed down the steps. He couldn't see in the dark, and as he descended, the hem of his robe swept the ground so that he could easily trip and fall. Lin Qingyu didn't understand why he'd agreed to sleep in this ridiculous bunk bed in the first place.

"Careful."

A hand reached out, as thin and weak as cold, broken jade. Lin Qingyu also extended his hand, but he was afraid to rest his entire weight on the other man. He only placed his hand lightly on Lu Wancheng's palm.

Cold extremities were one of Lu Wancheng's longtime problems. Lin Qingyu didn't have a lot of yang energy, but his hand was still much warmer in comparison. Lu Wancheng hadn't even had time to react to the soft, warm sensation on his palm when Lin Qingyu reached the ground and pulled his hand back.

Did that count as holding hands? Lu Wancheng wondered. *Sort of? Not really?*

He muffled a cough. He could tell that he'd used all his strength, which forced him to sit back down on the bed.

"I didn't want to wake you," he laughed, "but turning eighteen is important to me. I…I want to share this moment with you."

Lin Qingyu lit a candle. "What's so important about turning eighteen?"

"In my homeland, boys can do lots of things once they turn eighteen. Same thing with girls."

"Such as?"

"Play games late into the night, or stay outside at a hotel by themselves, or…" Lu Wancheng paused, his gaze lingering momentarily, bashfully, on Lin Qingyu's lips. "I've been waiting for this day since I was a child. Even after coming here, I counted down the days."

They both practiced the same approach toward Lu Wancheng's true identity; Lu Wancheng never discussed it, and Lin Qingyu never inquired. Still, he could envision the vague silhouette of a different person from Lu Wancheng's occasional mentions of his past.

He didn’t know how this young man had become Lu Wancheng. He didn’t believe in ghosts or souls, but he believed in his own intuition.

The young man would be a healthy and clever, yet lazy, youth who could never get enough sleep. He wouldn’t try hard in school either; he would nap on his desk while the teacher taught at the podium, but he’d still get top marks in each exam. He would be quite handsome and involuntarily enamor many classmates. When he received snacks from his admirers, he’d even share with his friends. What a pity that he was lazy, too lazy even to reciprocate others’ affections, to the extent that he’d still never held hands with a girl.

And today…today was that youth’s eighteenth birthday.

“So an eighteenth birthday in your homeland is even more important than a twentieth birthday here.”

“Right. When I got here, I’d just turned seventeen. I didn’t think I’d live to eighteen, but who knew I’d hold on so long?”

“It’s truly been a challenge to extend your life so long. I can’t imagine who did most of the work,” Lin Qingyu said pointedly.

“Of course you did most of the work, Physician Lin.” Lu Wancheng was so weak that he couldn’t even raise his voice; he could only laugh breathily. “Qingyu, I’m really glad that I could live to eighteen. No matter what the original book said, Physician Lin—who didn’t poison me, but instead gave me half a year—has always been and will always be the beautiful, kind protagonist in my eyes.”

For Lin Qingyu, “protagonist” was another strange word. He didn’t know whether it was because tonight’s candlelight was too low and gentle, but he didn’t want to guess at its definition like he usually did.

“What does ‘protagonist’ mean?” he asked directly.

Lu Wancheng looked at him. “The ‘protagonist’ is the person who—however many blades get swung at them, however much blood is on their hands—always shines the brightest, even if they just crawled out of the mud.”

Lin Qingyu smiled slightly. He sat down next to Lu Wancheng, posture relaxed, expression soft. The cold aura around him dissipated, and his jade-like profile was even more beautiful in the flickering candlelight.

Only one glance. That was all Lu Wancheng had the courage to take before hastily looking away.

He and Lin Qingyu sat together on the edge of the bottom bunk, their shoulders touching. Lu Wancheng wanted to say more, but for some reason, he couldn’t find his voice. He swallowed over and over, but he couldn’t manage to say a single word, and that half-dead thing in his chest just beat harder and harder.

Lin Qingyu didn’t notice Lu Wancheng’s odd behavior. “Are there birthday customs in your homeland?”

Lu Wancheng thought for a minute. “Longevity noodles.”

“I’ll have someone make them for you.”

Using his birthday as an excuse, Lu Wancheng pressed his luck. “Why not do it for me yourself?”

Lin Qingyu paused. “I don’t really know how.”

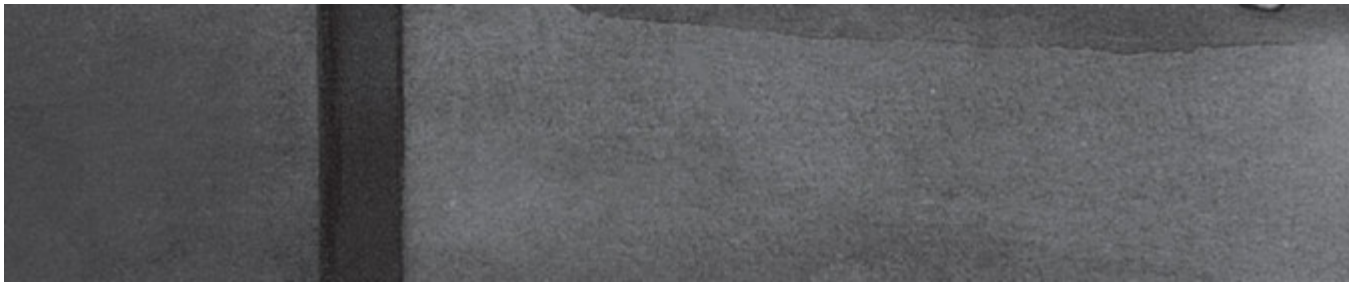
Lu Wancheng laughed, his eyes curving. “Then do what you know how to.”

Although Lin Qingyu hadn’t been born into a rich, elite family, he was genuinely a young master, having been attended by servants all his life. Of course he didn’t know his way around the kitchen. What he knew how to do… That would be…

Lin Qingyu stood up. “Undress.”

Lu Wancheng froze. He thought he’d heard wrong. “What?”

“I’ll perform acupuncture on you to help you sleep soundly tonight.”



Lu Wancheng's smile froze, and he raised his hand to scratch his face. "… Thanks."

On Lu Wancheng's eighteenth birthday, Lin Qingyu gave him a good night's sleep.

***

Winter was imminent. Hualu carefully folded and put away the spring and summer clothes, taking out the thicker apparel worn during winter. Last year's winter clothes all sat in a wooden chest, and Hualu spent a lot of time and effort unpacking them tidily. As she did so, she accidentally discovered a set of special, extravagantly embroidered clothes at the bottom of the chest—gold-trimmed, fire-red garments with skirts long enough to sweep the floor. These were the wedding robes that Lin Qingyu had worn when he married into the manor. In addition to the robes, the headdress and veil that he'd worn that day were also in the chest.

Unmarried girls always admired wedding robes deeply. Hualu hung the robes up to air out and exclaimed, "Young Master, Young Lord, look what I found!"

Lu Wancheng came over but didn't understand what he was looking at. "What are these?"

"The wedding robes that the young lord wore during your wedding. Young Master, don't you remember?"

Lu Wancheng straightened up and stared at the garments for a long time. "I think they really are."

"Why did you unpack these?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Hualu smiled. "You usually like plain, solid colors, Young Lord—mostly white. I've never seen you wear a bright hue before."

"You didn't see him during their wedding?" Huantong interrupted.

"The wedding veil covered the young lord's face then. If I couldn't see his face, it doesn't count." Hualu looked at Lu Wancheng, who seemed deep in thought, and teased, "Young Master, were you shocked beyond belief when you lifted the veil and saw the young lord wearing these robes?"

Lu Wancheng looked extremely pained. "…I forget."

He only remembered having seen a classic beauty when he woke up. Then, he'd been too busy feeling astonished—he hadn't paid specific attention to that beauty's good looks. Later on, he'd been so tired that he simply fell asleep. Looking back now, he remembered only that Lin Qingyu's robes had been pretty. But the reason they were pretty, what specifically was pretty about them, he truly didn't remember.

Hualu stared at Lu Wancheng in shock. "That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. How could you forget?"

"It's nothing shocking." Lin Qingyu added charcoal to the brazier in front of Lu Wancheng. "I don't remember what the young marquess looked like in his wedding robes either." On the wedding night, all he'd been thinking about was how to poison Lu Wancheng and kill him faster. He certainly hadn't been in the mood to

admire wedding robes.

Lu Wancheng rolled his wheelchair over to the hanging robes and reached out to touch the gold embroidery. “Tell me, Qingyu, how much money would it take for you to wear this again for me?”

Lin Qingyu didn’t even raise his head. “If you want wedding robes worn so badly, why don’t you wear them yourself?”

“I will. We can wear our wedding robes together.” Seeing that Lin Qingyu wasn’t at all convinced, Lu Wancheng swallowed his pride and whined, “I’m begging you, Miracle Physician Lin.”

“You’re *begging* me to do something as trivial as this? Can you have some dignity?”

“I really, really want to see it,” Lu Wancheng said quietly. If he saw their wedding outfits again, he’d definitely remember—even after death.

Lin Qingyu hadn’t yet replied when a servant came in and announced that Lady Pan wanted to discuss something in the parlor with the young lord.

***

Early the next morning, Lu Niantao took a carriage to the palace. This time, Lady Liang didn’t accompany her.

The crown prince hadn’t yet chosen concubines. The empress had invited a group of elite young women to the palace to admire the flowers in the garden, but everyone knew that this was an opportunity to meet the crown prince. Once the flower-viewing party was over, the concubines would likely be selected.

Although the marquess of Nan’an was deliberately keeping his distance from the crown prince, he approved of the fact that his daughter had made it into the selection of women. The crown prince was choosing an official concubine this time; even the emperor endorsed the process. The crown prince was just that, after all—a day would come when he ruled the empire. If his daughter was beside the crown prince, that would provide the marquess with a support system in the future.

“According to the auntie in her courtyard, Second Young Lady dressed austerely today. She typically prefers girlish light pink, but today she wore all white to the palace. She didn’t wear too many hair accessories either,” Lady Pan said. “Compared to the other elite girls, she may be quite elegant, but she won’t be extravagant.”

Lin Qingyu scoffed. “Don’t worry. The crown prince may like that type.”

“I also heard that her makeup was a bit odd this time. She drew a mole beneath her left eye, just like…just like yours, Young Lord,” Lady Pan said carefully.

Lin Qingyu didn’t react much to this. He only said coolly, “This is the path Second Young Lady chose. No one forced her or coerced her. If anything happens, it will only result from her own actions. It will have nothing to do with anyone else.”

Lady Pan lowered her eyes. “Naturally not.”

Lin Qingyu noticed that Lady Pan wasn’t leaving. “Is there something else?” he asked.

Lady Pan hesitated briefly. “Young Lord, I remember you once said that the young marquess…wouldn’t last until the year’s end.”

Lin Qingyu stilled. “Yes.”

“It’s already the tenth month.” Lady Pan couldn’t help looking saddened. “Isn’t it time to start preparing the young marquess’s last rites?”

Lin Qingyu was silent for a long time. “I’ll see to it myself.”

Chapter 31

THREE DAYS AFTER the flower-viewing party, a eunuch from the palace came to the marquess's manor to announce that the emperor and empress had chosen the marquess of Nan'an's daughter, Lu Niantao, as the crown prince's concubine. A general's daughter had also been chosen.

The eunuch who delivered the good news said that the crown prince and Lu Niantao had met in the gardens even before the flower-viewing party started. Lu Niantao had lost a perfumed sachet, and while searching for it, she'd bumped into the crown prince. She'd been serene and charming but also friendly and open, and the crown prince was immediately smitten.

"His Highness is quite selective. Young Lady Lu has good luck indeed. She is sure to become a favorite in the Eastern Palace soon."

Lin Qingyu nearly laughed aloud. He couldn't believe some people actually wanted this kind of luck.

Although a royal concubine's status was quite high and mighty, Lu Niantao would only ever be a lesser partner. There wouldn't even be a formal wedding—how would the crown prince's future main wife feel about that? The empress just told the Bureau of Astronomy to choose an auspicious date. On that day, she would send two marriage litters on which the concubines could enter the Eastern Palace directly.

Lu Niantao was set to enter the Eastern Palace in one month. They didn't have much time at all. Lady Liang, who'd had nothing to do for a long while, finally found herself busy again, running back and forth to prepare her daughter's dowry. Thanks to his daughter, the marquess of Nan'an's attitude toward Lady Liang softened considerably, and others in the manor grew even more eager to endear themselves to his main wife—after all, Second Young Lady was about to become the crown prince's concubine. Once the crown prince took the throne, she would be at least a noble consort. If she went on to bear a son, her future would be even more glorious. Knowing that, who would dare to oppose her now?

As soon as Lady Liang recovered her confidence, she ordered that boxes and boxes of top-quality items be carried out of the storehouses. Huantong felt pained as he watched; he had been hoping that his young master could leave the manor with a hefty inheritance.

"Young Master, I heard the storehouse manager say that the lady even took the Jiangnan silk that the empress bestowed on the young marquess."

Lin Qingyu didn't care. "Let her take it." Indeed, he hoped that Lu Niantao would make new clothes and attract Xiao Cheng to the point that they had fun every night before he died on top of her. Lin Qingyu knew that those thoughts were unnecessarily vicious, but Xiao Cheng deserved that.

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The date of Lu Niantao's departure arrived in the blink of an eye.

At the auspicious time, the marquess and marchioness of Nan'an sat in the proper seats in the main hall. The elders of the Lu family sat on either side. Lu Wancheng was the only person around Lu Niantao's age sitting in a wheelchair. Everyone else stood.

Soon, Lu Niantao walked in slowly, supported by a matron of honor and decked in gold accessories and red robes. The wedding robes for a concubine of the crown prince were naturally provided by palace tailors, and they were elegant and extravagant—much more so than Lin Qingyu's own wedding robes had been. Gold hairpins and a phoenix coronet sat on Lu Niantao's head; a bead curtain hung in front of her face, and a huadian was drawn between her brows.

Lu Wancheng suddenly remembered something important and turned to Lin Qingyu. "On our wedding night, you also had a huadian, right, Qingyu?"

"More than just a huadian," Lin Qingyu said expressionlessly. "I even wore makeup."

Lu Wancheng pounded his wheelchair's armrest. "Ugh. How could I have been asleep then?"

Lu Niantao walked to her mother and father, knelt to the ground, and then prostrated herself. "Your daughter is unfilial and cannot remain at your side. Father, Mother, please accept three prostrations for your kindness in raising me."

Holding back tears, Lady Liang helped her daughter to her feet. She was about to speak when a steward hurried in. "Master, Lady, the crown prince is here! He says he's here to pick up the young lady!"

The hall immediately erupted into chaos.

Lu Niantao would merely be a concubine. According to etiquette, the crown prince only needed to await her in the Eastern Palace. The fact that he'd personally come for her truly honored the marquess of Nan'an.

The Lu family elders all congratulated the marquess.

"It's such an honor that His Highness appreciates his noble concubine so much!"

"I almost forgot this ceremony was for a concubine. Not even a grand wedding to a main wife could be better!"

Even now, the marquess of Nan'an remembered to speak carefully. "Don't exaggerate. A wife is a wife. A concubine is a concubine. How can the two be compared? Everyone follow me to greet His Highness."

Behind the beaded curtain over her face, Lu Niantao's expression fell, but her matron of honor covered her face with her veil.

"Should we go?" Lin Qingyu asked.

Lu Wancheng's smile was frosty. "Of course. He's my cousin, after all, and he's taking my half sister as a concubine. No matter what, we have to go congratulate them."

Following the crowd, Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng's wheelchair to the gate of the manor. Xiao Cheng did not arrive on horseback like a typical groom. Instead, he sat in the sedan reserved for the crown prince, not even rising to his feet when the marquess of Nan'an came out. He seemed to be here to show off his status and title rather than to pick up his bride. He was, in Lu Wancheng's words, "making a

fool of himself" again.

The marquess of Nan'an began to lead his large family in greeting the crown prince.

"No need," Xiao Cheng said slowly. He singled out Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng within the crowd, and his lips curved in interest; finally, he rose from the litter.

A matron of honor helped Lu Niantao through the manor gate and was about to give Lu Niantao's hand to Xiao Cheng, as was typical. But Xiao Cheng only paused briefly before saying, "Help the concubine into the nuptial litter."

The matron was startled, but she didn't dare ask why; obediently, she guided Lu Niantao into the litter. Meanwhile, Xiao Cheng strode directly to Lu Wancheng. "My younger cousin, you've been ill for so long. My imperial mother and I have both been worried about you. Have you felt better lately?"

Lu Wancheng smiled. "No, not at all. I fear I'll continue to worry Your Highness."

Xiao Cheng leaned down. He spoke to Lu Wancheng but eyed Lin Qingyu. "Don't worry, cousin. After you go, I'll help take good care of Xiao-Qingyu."

"Xiao-Qingyu." Lu Wancheng laughed lowly. "I'm a bit curious. How will Your Highness refer to your new concubine? As 'Xiao-Taotao'?"

Xiao Cheng narrowed his eyes in displeasure. "You have the strength to make jokes? Why don't you reserve your strength and rest? After all, when one dies, everything ends."

Lu Wancheng smiled slightly. "Please don't worry, Your Highness. Nothing will be over until I say so."

Xiao Cheng straightened up, looked deeply into Lin Qingyu's eyes, then turned away. "Back to the palace."

The marriage procession moved away, leaving the marquess of Nan'an and Lady Liang busy entertaining the Lu relatives. Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng didn't want to involve themselves in that, so they returned to Lanfeng Pavilion.

Lin Qingyu furrowed his eyebrows. "Xiao Cheng already has Lu Niantao, so why…"

"Why is he still giving you that disgusting leer? Well… Do you know what people trying to replace someone have in common?" Lu Wancheng asked, deliberately making Lin Qingyu guess.

"What?"

Lu Wancheng's tone was light and scornful. "They prefer to ignore things they already have, and they always desire what they can't have. Ironically, if you'd submitted to him long ago, he wouldn't keep taking such interest in you. But now you've become the first person who dared to reject him. Of course he sees you in a different light."

Lin Qingyu's eyebrows knitted even tighter. "Isn't that tawdry of him?"

Lu Wancheng laughed. "That's exactly right. It's simply tawd—" He started coughing again and couldn't stop for a long time.

Lin Qingyu patted his back lightly. "Go sleep a bit."

Lu Wancheng took his medicine and napped. As he did, Hualu walked in and looked around. “Young Lord, where’s the young marquess?”

“He just fell asleep. What’s wrong?”

Hualu lowered her voice. “The man from the funeral parlor is here.”

That shop sold funerary items. Lin Qingyu had chosen the oldest funeral parlor in the capital. Prior to the Great Yu dynasty, the institution had already lasted centuries. In addition to selling items, the parlor also offered funeral services. So long as one had money, they could provide one with a glorious send-off.

Lin Qingyu glanced toward the inner room. “Where is he?”

“Outside the gate,” Hualu said. “He said that he shouldn’t enter, since there’s a wedding today—otherwise, he might bring bad luck on the manor.”

Lin Qingyu met the funeral-parlor employee in front of the gate. Although the man worked in a field pertaining to death, he was quite cheerful. “Please don’t hesitate to let me know what you need, Young Lord. Our shop will do everything we can to help the marquess’s household with this funeral.”

Lin Qingyu had never handled a funeral before, and he was a bit lost. He looked at the auspicious wedding calligraphy secured to the manor door and at the red ribbons that hung from the rafters, thought for a long time, and said, “Then do it according to his tastes.”

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These days, Lu Wancheng slept a lot, but he woke up a lot as well. He roused, coughing, every two hours; the passing days cycled between sleep and wakefulness.

When he woke this time, it was evening. He saw Lin Qingyu sitting by his bedside, peacefully watching over him, the sunset washing the man’s profile with a warm layer of lingering light.

Lu Wancheng saw double. “Qingyu…” he called involuntarily.

“I’m here,” said Lin Qingyu.

“Is there news from the Eastern Palace?” Lu Wancheng asked in a daze.

Lin Qingyu didn’t say anything.

Incense was absorbed into the body through the nose. Achieving their desired results would take much longer than a day. In fact, there would probably be no results for several months.

“Let’s not talk about that right now,” Lin Qingyu said gently. “What color do you like, Wancheng?”

Lu Wancheng was taken aback, as if he’d realized something, then smiled. “In the past, I wore a lot of black, white, and gray. But in Great Yu, I like red. It looks pretty with long hair.”

Lin Qingyu nodded. “All right.”

“On that note, are you preparing my last rites?” Lu Wancheng asked, still smiling. “I don’t care about anything else, but could you let me pick my own coffin?”

“Why…?”

“I want a comfortable one,” Lu Wancheng joked.

Chapter 32

LIN QINGYU INITIALLY THOUGHT that Lu Wancheng was merely joking, but he really did start to plan his own funeral. He found the garments the funeral parlor offered ugly and said that he wanted to wear his own clothes in his coffin. Then, he decided that pure-white clothes on attendees were too plain, and he asked if he could have them dress colorfully instead. When he found out that he couldn't carve his chosen epitaph on his gravestone, he even argued with Lin Qingyu about it.

"Why not?" Lu Wancheng said angrily. "It's my own epitaph! I don't have the right to choose?"

"'Here lies a salted fish who, after death, can finally sleep'? How do you think generations a hundred or thousand years from now would look upon you?" Lin Qingyu ribbed him.

Lu Wancheng laughed leisurely. "They'd probably think I was a genius ahead of my time. Then they'd list me in the 'Eight Noble Families of Great Yu' or something like that…"

"Even dreams should be realistic," Lin Qingyu interrupted mercilessly.

Lu Wancheng seemed despondent that his thoughtful and creative poetry couldn't be carved onto his tombstone. He sat in his wheelchair sighing, which provoked Hualu's maternal instincts. On the other hand, Lin Qingyu didn't pay him any attention, going to the study to work.

Soon, Hualu came to find him, holding a plate of freshly washed jujubes. "Young Lord, would you like a jujube?" she asked, looking as though she wanted to say something more.

"Say what you want to say," Lin Qingyu responded.

Hualu hesitated for a long time. "The young master only has a month left. I think you should be good to him and indulge his wishes."

Lin Qingyu smiled slightly. "But he doesn't want me to give in to him."

Hualu was surprised. "What?"

"He's using every means he can to set us at ease, so how could I go against his wishes like that?" A barely noticeable trace of gentleness colored Lin Qingyu's voice. "Tell everyone in Lanfeng Pavilion that, for these last few days, we should do whatever we need to—just like normal."

Hualu didn't really understand what he meant, but she trusted the young lord. She had been by the young marquess's side for so long, yet she didn't dare to claim she understood him. Yet the young lord, who'd been married into the household for not even a year, had already seen right through the young master.

Perhaps they were what the scholars called "soulmates."

***

A coffin was where someone who'd died slept forever. Of all the funeral items, it was undoubtedly the most important. Remembering what Lu Wancheng had said, Lin Qingyu made sure to bring him along when it was time to choose. The funeral parlor couldn't bring every single coffin to the manor for them to peruse, so they needed to visit the shop themselves.

Specialty stores like funeral parlors were usually along dark, secret alleyways. In fact, every store on this entire street dealt with the dead. The funeral parlor that Lin Qingyu had hired, Wuwang Parlor, was the largest.

Lin Qingyu walked in front, pushing Lu Wancheng; Huantong followed them timidly, rubbing his arms. He found this street much colder than the other streets; even the wind's whistle was like the moans of ghosts. When they occasionally passed a store with paper dolls in front of its door, goosebumps erupted all over his skin.

The man from Wuwang Parlor knew that the young lord from the marquess's manor was coming, so he'd waited at the door for a long time.

"Your humble servant welcomes you, Young Lord." When the employee saw Lu Wancheng in his wheelchair, he continued in surprise, "This can't be…"

"The young marquess," Huantong said.

Lu Wancheng smiled as he greeted the employee, who looked as though he was in shock. He'd been in this business for a long time, but he'd never seen anyone personally visit the funeral parlor to pick their own coffin.

"Where are the coffins?" Lin Qingyu asked.

The employee reacted extremely promptly, smiling. "They're ready for you to peruse. Young Marquess, Young Lord, please follow me."

Although Wuwang Parlor's front door was small, the shop held an entirely different world inside. New coffins were arranged neatly in the yard, all in different styles, and the employee made sure to introduce each one.

"This is made of catalpa wood, and this is made of nanmu. Catalpa resists rot and repels moisture well. Nanmu, on the other hand, has a dense grain and doesn't warp easily… Young Lord, Young Marquess, which two would you like?"

Lu Wancheng noticed something odd about that statement. "Two?"

"Since you're married, Young Marquess, the young lord will naturally be buried with you later. That's what we mean when we say that husband and wife are together in life and in death. A hundred years from now, you two will remain buried together so that your romance can continue in the future."

Both Lin Qingyu and Lu Wancheng abruptly fell silent.

Lin Qingyu had never thought about being buried next to Lu Wancheng. He only recognized the meaning of "husband and wife" after the employee reminded them of it.

Although Lin Qingyu had opposed their marriage, and Lu Wancheng hadn't even known about it, their wedding ceremony had been properly completed with all the necessary rituals, such as paying respects to the heavens, the earth, and their parents. It was extremely different from the nuptials between Xiao Cheng and Lu Niantao.

Husband and wife, in love and trust. In life, I return to you forever. In death, I think of you forever.[23]

The words “husband and wife” were much too weighty.

Lu Wancheng smiled toward Lin Qingyu. “Co-burial… It’s too early to speak of that now. Plus, I’m used to sleeping alone. I have no qualms about us being buried together, but I don’t want you to feel like an outsider in the Lu family grave.”

If it were the Jiang family grave, he could’ve considered it.

At a loss, the employee looked at Lin Qingyu. “Young Lord, this…”

“Listen to the young marquess,” Lin Qingyu said coolly.

The employee didn’t dare argue. “Wuwang Parlor has more new wares in the back. Young Marquess, Young Lord, please follow me.”

Suddenly, a quiet female voice reached their ears. This scared Huantong so badly he nearly jumped onto Lin Qingyu. “Y-Young Master, did you hear someone crying?”

“Don’t be afraid, sir. That’s another guest looking for a coffin,” the employee explained.

They followed the employee through rows and rows of coffins and indeed saw a woman. She wore all white, the color of mourning. Her eyes were unfocused and her face haggard. She looked very frail, as if the slightest breeze could blow her over. Despite this, however, it was easy to see that she’d once been beautiful.

“This is Mistress Huo,” the employee whispered. “Her husband contracted consumption three years ago and passed away yesterday at home.”

Mistress Huo had originally been a talented dancer from the Bureau of Entertainment. When she met and fell in love with a scholar by chance, they’d eloped. The scholar had freed her by selling everything he owned, draining all his savings. They thought they could be together until both their hair turned gray, but their idyllic life lasted only a few years before they were separated forever.

“Mistress Huo is a weak woman who has nevertheless experienced the cruelties of the world,” the employee couldn’t help exclaiming. “She has no parents, was widowed so young, and is still so beautiful. I’m afraid her future looks bleak.”

They stood very close to Mistress Huo, but she seemed unable to see or hear them. Her hand softly swept over a nanmu coffin as she murmured, “*I wish to be the southwest wind, diving into your embrace…*”[24]

A tear slid down from the corner of her eye, falling, shattering.

Lin Qingyu looked away. “Let’s go.”

Lu Wancheng was silent for a long time. Then he smiled. “I thought that that nanmu coffin looked pretty good. Are there any other styles that I can see?”

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Predictably, Wuwang Parlor was the best in its field. They worked quickly and efficiently; only a few days later, they’d already prepared Lu Wancheng’s nanmu coffin and other funerary items. In Lu Wancheng’s own words, he “might say goodbye to everyone anytime now.”

After everything was ready, the employee came to the manor about the bill. Lin Qingyu personally tipped him for doing his work so well. The employee took the tip and smiled.

"There's more to do at the parlor," he said, "so your humble servant will stop bothering the young marquess and young lord."

"Is Wuwang Parlor busier during the winter?" Lu Wancheng asked offhandedly.

"Of course," the employee said. "Every year, there are elders who can't survive the harsh weather. But today, the deceased is a young woman… You might remember her. It's Mistress Huo, whom you saw at the parlor just the other day."

Lu Wancheng was stunned. "She was fine that day. Why did she pass so suddenly?"

The employee sighed. "Mistress Huo couldn't stand the pain of losing her husband. After finishing his funeral proceedings, she threw herself into the lake to follow him."

When Hualu heard this, her eyes filled with tears, and she covered her mouth. Even Huantong looked shocked.

Lin Qingyu glanced at Lu Wancheng, then told the funeral-parlor employee, "Thank you. You can go now."

After the man left, Lu Wancheng quieted down significantly. Lin Qingyu more or less guessed what he was thinking. It undoubtedly had a lot to do with Mistress Huo.

As Lin Qingyu thought might happen, after Lu Wancheng finished drinking his medicine, he suddenly asked, "Qingyu, you don't consider me your husband yet, do you?"

"I told you," Lin Qingyu said, "I consider you a friend—a close friend."

Oh, that's good—just a close friend. But if a close friend is no longer here, he'll be sad and upset too. "No. Don't even think of me as a close friend." Lu Wancheng was a bit frantic now. "See me as…a tool."

A tool… So, as disposable? As undeserving of any emotional investment? Lu Wancheng hoped Lin Qingyu would see him like that? Lin Qingyu let out a hollow laugh. "What kind of person do you take me for, Lu Wancheng?"

Lu Wancheng was shocked. "Qingyu…?"

"You think that, after your death, I'll act like other widows—cry all day and watch eagerly for death?" Lin Qingyu's voice was as cold as the proud winter snow. "You think I'll give up on life, stagnate, live in my memories of you? You're wrong, Lu Wancheng. If I were so easy to break, so indecisive and weak, I would have killed myself on our wedding day." Lin Qingyu looked at Lu Wancheng. He swallowed, then said calmly, "You needn't worry. I'll watch you go, and then…live on."

Lu Wancheng looked at him for a long time, his eyes like rippling autumn water, then nearly sighed, "What do I do, Qingyu? You really…suit all my kinks perfectly."

Chapter 33

ON THE FIRST DAY of winter, the water froze into ice, the earth turned solid, the leaves fell, the grass browned, and all the bugs hid away. The osmanthus trees in Lanfeng Pavilion no longer gave off their fragrant scent, leaving them with only layers of bare branches.

On the other side of the manor was Lady Liang's courtyard. The days grew colder and colder, but her rooms were warm and bustling with life. Ever since Lu Niantao had married into the palace as a concubine, Lady Liang seemed to have won over the marquess's heart again. He went as far as to deliberately give her a portion of the household duties once more. Even sickly Lu Qiaosong became reenergized and sought famous physicians high and low, hoping to cure his unspeakable malady.

After Lu Wancheng heard that, he asked Lin Qingyu, "Lu Qiaosong can't be healed, can he?"

"Of course not," Lin Qingyu said confidently.

"Good." Lu Wancheng coughed, then smiled. "Qingyu, we seem to be good-for-nothing, gloating, evil villains who join together to curse others."

Lin Qingyu laughed along with him. "It feels good to be a villain."

As they spoke, Hualu entered the room to pour them hot tea. Lu Wancheng noticed that her eyes looked a bit red; she had seemingly been crying. "What's wrong, Hualu? Who bullied you?"

Hualu pouted. "No one," she muttered.

"Huantong?" Lin Qingyu asked. Hualu was a senior servant within Lanfeng Pavilion, so the only person who would dare to upset her was Huantong.

Hualu had originally felt that her grievance wasn't major, but now that both her masters were concerned about her, she began to feel wronged and recounted the events in a choked voice.

It turned out that it was now popular in the capital to put an adhesive huadian in the middle of one's forehead. That intrigued Hualu, and although she hadn't had any such huadian, she'd drawn one on herself that morning. Hualu was great at cleaning but quite clumsy when applying makeup. What was supposed to be a plum blossom had turned out like a big blob, and to make matters worse, Huantong had coincidentally stumbled upon her. He'd mocked her for ages, saying that she was only a laughable copycat.

"Huantong—that boy! Does he even know how to respect a girl? Don't worry, I'll reprimand him later," Lu Wancheng comforted her. "I know how to scold someone so well that once I'm done, even his mother won't recognize him."

Hualu finally cracked a smile.

"I know how to draw a huadian," Lin Qingyu told her. "I'll help you draw one to make this up to you."

"Aren't those something only girls can draw? How come you know how?" Lu Wancheng asked in surprise.

“Are they that difficult?” Lin Qingyu asked neutrally. “Hualu, bring me your makeup box.”

Hualu seldom put on makeup, so she didn’t own much of it. She did have rouge, however, which women frequently used. Lin Qingyu took a clean brush and dipped it in rouge. Then, holding back his sleeve, he began to draw between Hualu’s eyebrows.

Enveloped in the crisp, elegant scent of books and scrolls, Hualu saw the young lord’s cool, beautiful jawline as soon as she looked up, which made her body tense. Although she only felt respect toward the young lord, she couldn’t help her quickening heartbeat and burning cheeks. She also couldn’t stop herself from wondering… If the young lord hadn’t married into the manor as a male wife, how many girls’ hearts would he have captured?

Soon, Lin Qingyu set down his brush. “All right.”

He had drawn a small group of cute, lively-looking flames in only a few strokes. Hualu looked at herself in the mirror and exclaimed, “Young Lord is magnificent!”

Lu Wancheng laughed. “You’re so beautiful, you’re sure to blind Huantong’s unappreciative eyes.”

Hualu felt so shy that her cheeks turned bright red. “Who wants to show *him*?”

Lu Wancheng spoke up again. “Since you can paint so well, Qingyu, why don’t you do one for yourself too?”

“Why don’t I paint one for *you*, if you’re so interested?” Lin Qingyu retorted.

“Sure,” Lu Wancheng said happily.

In the end, though, Lu Wancheng didn’t get to wear his own huadian; a servant reported that Imperial Physician Hu had arrived.

Hu Ji was Lin Qingyu’s main source of information from the palace, so Lin Qingyu immediately told the servant to admit Imperial Physician Hu and serve him tea.

As soon as Hu Ji observed Lu Wancheng lying in bed during the daytime rather than sitting in his wheelchair, he knew that things weren’t promising. He respectfully avoided asking about Lu Wancheng’s health, only reporting recent palace news to Lin Qingyu—in particular, news about the Eastern Palace.

Now that the crown prince had taken two concubines, the Eastern Palace had become much livelier. Since one concubine came from a politician’s family, and the other from a general’s, their respective personalities were naturally serene and vibrant. According to a eunuch from the Eastern Palace, the crown prince had appeared to treat the two concubines equitably at first, but he’d privately preferred Concubine Lu; he once spent three nights in a row with her. Yet later—probably because their freshness wore off—the crown prince became much colder toward both concubines. Even when he visited them, it seemed perfunctory.

“What’d I say?” Lu Wancheng asked slowly. “It’s what the crown prince can’t have that tempts him.”

Lin Qingyu’s brow furrowed slightly. He had thought that Lu Niantao could hold Xiao Cheng’s attention for at least half a year, but he’d overestimated her. If Xiao Cheng didn’t stay with her often, then the poison would take even longer to act.

Given Lu Wancheng's current condition, how could he wait that long?

"That useless idiot," Lin Qingyu fumed. "She can't even become a favorite concubine."

"Don't be angry," Lu Wancheng soothed him, though it ended with a cough. "Lu Niantao… She's smart and extremely competitive. She'll find a way to gain his favor."

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes briefly to calm himself, then asked about something else. He'd heard that an epidemic had broken out in the south as soon as the winter began, and he was worried about how it had developed.

"The situation's awful. Several villages in Hong Prefecture are entirely empty. So much is happening everywhere right now. The southern epidemic, the western war…" The longer Hu Ji spoke, the sadder he grew. "And His Majesty's health isn't improving either."

When Hu Ji brought up the west, Lin Qingyu thought of his father far away in Yongliang. "Do you have any news of my father, Imperial Physician Hu?"

"From the time Head Imperial Physician Lin arrived in Yongliang until now, he's been trying to treat Great General Gu's poisoning. We don't know where those western bastards got such an odd poison, but Head Imperial Physician Lin is trying everything he can to no avail. Great General Gu grows weaker by the day, and I hear that he may not last until the new year."

"Then won't I meet this General Gu in the underworld?" Lu Wancheng asked absently.

Great General Gu had come from poverty. He'd joined the army at fourteen and became a genius strategist. Among his innumerable achievements was his independent protection of the western border. Yet he was thirty years old and parentless, wifeless, and childless; his long spear was his only family.

Lin Qingyu laughed bitterly. "The heavens are unjust." Those who should meet a swift end didn't, whereas those who shouldn't die still couldn't count on a pleasant ending.

When Hu Ji left, the relaxed atmosphere they'd enjoyed while Lin Qingyu drew a huadian in front of a mirror had completely vanished. Lu Wancheng looked out the window.

"Will I really die before Xiao Cheng?" he sighed self-deprecatingly. "I don't want to."

After a stretch of silence, Lin Qingyu said, "There will be other ways—there must be."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "Yes, there will be."

Although both said this, they were only two people. With their resources, it would be nearly impossible to kill Xiao Cheng immediately; they couldn't even enter the palace.

If he'd anticipated this, Lin Qingyu would've given up medicine to become a warrior. Then, when Xiao Cheng called him "Xiao-Qingyu," he could have personally broken the crown prince's neck and watched the light in his eyes fade.

Lin Qingyu gradually became more restless. Lying in the bunk above Lu Wancheng, he tossed and turned the entire night. In the end, he had to make himself a

treatment for insomnia.

How could he help Lu Wancheng live longer? Just a bit longer…?

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Lu Wancheng woke up from the day's noon nap and—seeing that Lin Qingyu wasn't around—called, "Hualu, help me up."

Hualu set down what she'd been working on and helped him, putting a soft pillow behind his back. "What is it, Young Master?"

Lu Wancheng took a while to recover before he said, "In the second drawer from the left, there's a prescription. Give it to the people in the pharmacy and tell them to follow it when they make my medicine."

Hualu was dubious. "Who prescribed it? Let's tell the young lord about it first."

Lu Wancheng smiled. "Don't worry—it's Father-in-Law's prescription."

"Oh—it's from Head Imperial Physician Lin. That means it must be good!" Hualu exclaimed happily. "I'll go now."

Lu Wancheng stopped her. "You don't need to tell the young lord about this. Hm… That said, he's so smart, he'll probably be able to tell."

Some time before, Lin Qingyu had begun to personally monitor Lu Wancheng's medicinal schedule. As soon as it was time for Lu Wancheng to take a dose, Lin Qingyu returned to the room. Hualu brought the bowl of medicine, but when Lin Qingyu took it and sniffed, he knew immediately that it wasn't the prescription he'd created.

Suddenly, Lin Qingyu looked up. Lu Wancheng was smiling at him.

"What?" asked the young marquess.

Lin Qingyu's nails dug into his palm. He shook his head, saying as calmly as he could, "Nothing." If this was Lu Wancheng's choice, then he would respect it. "When did you ask my father for this?" he inquired.

Lu Wancheng didn't try to hide the answer from him. "The day Father-in-Law left, I woke up very early."

Lin Qingyu smiled wanly. "Such is fate. So you aren't afraid of pain anymore?"

"How painful can it be?" Lu Wancheng asked blithely. "Women bear the pain of childbirth. As much as this will hurt, it can't be worse than childbirth, can it?"

Lin Qingyu felt as though something heavy were sitting on his chest. "Didn't you say that your life was determined by the heavens, not yourself?" he replied hoarsely.

"Ah," Lu Wancheng said. "Well, I want to see the snow again. Just get one more glance…before I leave."

Lin Qingyu didn't say anything more. He patiently fed Lu Wancheng all the medicine, then stayed with him until its side effects began to appear.

Lu Wancheng's expression didn't change much, but veins bulged on the side of his forehead, and he was soon drenched in cold sweat. Meeting Lin Qingyu's gaze, he covered his eyes with a hand and laughed shakily. "Stop looking. My face must be contorting. It's probably really ugly."

Lin Qingyu took Lu Wancheng's hand and held it between his. "What can I do to help you feel a little better?" he asked softly.

Lu Wancheng exerted some effort to think about it, then said half-jokingly, "Um…let me take advantage of you just a bit?"

Lin Qingyu paused for a moment. "How so?"

"Don't worry, I won't be too greedy. I just want to hear you say…"

"'Wancheng-gege'?" Lin Qingyu guessed.

Lu Wancheng was indeed thinking of that, but when he saw Lin Qingyu's concerned gaze, he suddenly changed his mind. He wanted to be greedier. Either way…either way, Lin Qingyu would never know what Lu Wancheng had been trying to express for his entire lifetime.

Lu Wancheng shook his head. "Not 'gege.' Call me 'laogong.'"[25]

Lin Qingyu was stunned. Although resigned, he asked, "Do you know what that term means in Great Yu?"

"I know. It's another term for 'eunuch.'" Lu Wancheng wanted to speak to Lin Qingyu in his usual teasing tone, but he was in so much pain that he could barely force a broken smile. "I must admit, it's always been my dream to enter the palace and become a eunuch."

Lin Qingyu didn't know what to say. He had now confirmed that Lu Wancheng was delirious with pain. Why else would he say such ridiculous things?

"Will you let me take advantage of you that way?" Lu Wancheng asked with difficulty.

Why not? Lin Qingyu used his sleeve to gently wipe cold sweat from Lu Wancheng's forehead. "Laogong," he said softly.

Lu Wancheng smiled weakly, his eyes curving. He forced down the pained moan that nearly made its way out of his mouth. "That sounds so good. Thank you, laopo."[26]

Chapter 34

LIN QINGYU'S FATHER'S PRESCRIPTION relied on fighting poison with poison. It used toxic ingredients to activate a patient's last dregs of life force and extend their days. However, the medication was extremely poisonous. After entering the body, that poison brought about unbearable agony and uncontrollable side effects. Merely three days after he'd started this regimen, Lu Wancheng gradually lost feeling in his legs.

Despite the medication's harshness, the amount of time it could buy was limited. Each day after winter's arrival could be the last day of Lu Wancheng's life. As long as the young marquess was still alive, though, Xiao Cheng wouldn't be stupid enough to mess with the young lord of the marquess's manor. As Xiao Cheng himself had said—he was waiting. Once Lu Wancheng died, it would all be over.

In the middle of the tenth month, Zhang Shiquan—who'd had been away for months—finally got back the manor. The first thing he did upon his return was go to visit his two masters.

Lately, Lu Wancheng spent most of his time in a deep sleep, so Zhang Shiquan was only able to see Lin Qingyu.

"I investigated everything, Young Lord," Zhang Shiquan said, his voice extremely quiet. "That extra income from the store in Xu Prefecture actually came from a private salt business."

Lin Qingyu's eyes darkened, and he laughed. "You can't call Lady Liang capable—she can't even protect her own children. But can you call her incapable? She certainly has courage to engage in this business—one punishable by death if anyone ever found out. What a strange woman."

During the previous emperor's reign, private salt businesses had proliferated in Great Yu, and they'd been almost impossible to eradicate. They impacted the royal court's income heavily, so when the current emperor took the throne, he'd severely punished private salt businesses and even pushed out new salt laws. Making more than a certain amount off private salt sales was punishable by death. Despite the pressure that created, private salt businesses were so lucrative that many people took the risk anyway. Lin Qingyu would never have thought that Lady Liang was one of them.

After some thought, he said, "For a private salt business, there's not a lot of income in the ledger."

"Young Lord is brilliant. The physical storefront was but a sham. The majority of the profit went to the lady's parents."

No wonder. Compared to the marquess's family, Lady Liang's wasn't wealthy at all. But they believed that the world was so vast and the emperor so far away that they could secretly use the marquess's name to their advantage to do business in Xu Prefecture, quietly amassing great wealth. Even if local authorities there noticed something, they'd only look the other way, unwilling to offend the marquess of Nan'an.

Given the marquess's cautious personality, he obviously wouldn't involve himself with this kind of business, so he was probably unaware of it. If this secret

were revealed, the emperor might remember that the marquess had been loyal to the royal court all his life, so perhaps he wouldn't kill the marquess's entire family. Still, the marquess would definitely be stripped of his title and investigated.

"Young Lord, should I tell this to the young marquess?" Zhang Shiquan asked.

"No need." Lu Wancheng was still alive. He was, by name, someone from the marquess of Nan'an's manor. If the matter was revealed, he would also be involved. Lin Qingyu looked out the window and said coolly, "After he passes, I'll naturally deal with…everyone."

The two discussed the details of the evidence for a while longer. Suddenly, Lin Qingyu remembered that the Xu and Hong Prefectures weren't far apart. "Coming back from the south, did you encounter the epidemic?"

"That outbreak did come roaring in," said Zhang Shiquan, his expression grave. "The day after someone contracts the disease, they develop a fever and stomach pain, plus boils all over their body. Those with weak constitutions don't even make it past three days. The people of Hong Prefecture died village by village, and plenty of desperate people moved north, so that region's residents also began showing signs of the illness. I don't know when it will come ravage the capital, but I've heard that famous physicians from across the empire have gathered at the Imperial Academy of Medicine to find the cure as soon as possible."

And during this eventful season, the wind and rain raged on outside, bringing about what might have been Great Yu's coldest winter of the past decade.

Low coughs issued from the inner room. Lu Wancheng had awoken.

"Young Lord," said Zhang Shiquan, "I would like to pay my respects to the young marquess. I don't know whether…"

Zhang Shiquan had only come to the manor in the first place because Lu Wancheng invited him. Lin Qingyu understood his loyalty. "Go, but don't stay long."

Lu Wancheng needed to take his medicine as soon as he woke up. Today's dose hadn't yet arrived, though it had been quite a while, and Lin Qingyu planned to visit the apothecary in person to see why.

Zhang Shiquan followed Hualu into the inner room, only to see Lu Wancheng lying on the bottom bunk of a bunk bed. The young marquess's complexion was ashen, and he needed help even to sit up. Though he wasn't a physician, Zhang Shiquan could tell that the young man was already too far gone and would pass anytime now.

"You're back." Lu Wancheng's voice was weak too.

Zhang Shiquan's heart throbbed, pained. "My respects, Young Marquess."

Lu Wancheng dismissed Hualu, then asked, "Have you done what the young lord has told you to?"

Recalling that the young lord hadn't wanted him to reveal many details, Zhang Shiquan replied, "Don't worry, Young Marquess. Everything is within his grasp."

Lu Wancheng nodded slightly. "What about my request, then? Did you find them?"

"I did." Zhang Shiquan reached into his robe and took out something wrapped in a handkerchief. "This is the token you requested."

Lu Wancheng's finger twitched, gesturing for Zhang Shiquan to unwrap it.

“Should I tell the young lord about this?” Zhang Shiquan asked.

Lu Wancheng shook his head. “It’s not the right time.” He thought for a moment, then instructed, “Bring the manor’s carpenter.”

On the other side of the manor, Lin Qingyu hadn’t even entered the pharmacy before he heard bouts of arguing. Among the voices was Huantong’s: “Lanfeng Pavilion needs to use this type of fleeceflower root every day! Everyone knows that!”

“Eldest Young Master may be ill, but what of Third Young Master? There isn’t much thousand-year fleeceflower root in the pharmacy in the first place, and so far it’s all been used by Lanfeng Pavilion. What’s the problem with us taking some today?”

“How can Third Young Master’s illness compare to the young marquess’s?!” Huantong roared.

Lin Qingyu interrupted them. “What’s going on?”

When they saw him, everyone shut up immediately, but it was obvious that the apothecary workers still weren’t going to back down. Lady Liang had been regaining power recently, and the young marquess was on the verge of death. The servants no longer respected the soon-to-be widowed young lord as much as they previously had.

“Young Master!” Huantong ran to him and furiously began to explain what had happened.

With his mother and elder sister’s encouragement, Lu Qiaosong had regained his drive and visited countless physicians. He’d taken so many medicines that he’d lost track of them all, but none helped his problem in the slightest. He didn’t dare hope to recover enough to go seven rounds in a night again; he just wanted to be capable of producing an heir.

A few days earlier, a wandering physician had recommended himself to the manor, saying that he had a good prescription that could help Lu Qiaosong recover his former glory. Lu Qiaosong was desperate. He hadn’t cared who this wandering physician was, or where he came from, and he immediately ordered the servants to fill the prescription. One ingredient was thousand-year fleeceflower root. That was an extremely rare medicinal herb that money couldn’t easily buy. Even the marquess of Nan’an’s household had only a puny supply on hand.

Lu Wancheng’s medicine also required thousand-year fleeceflower root. Lin Qingyu had spent a lot of money finding just a bit and stored it in the pharmacy for Lu Wancheng’s medicine. Today, Huantong had come for that medicine as usual, only to bump into servants from Qingdai Pavilion requesting thousand-year fleeceflower root from Lanfeng Pavilion’s supply. Huantong had decisively rushed over to stop them, and the two sides butted heads, nearly coming to blows.

“In the future, Lanfeng Pavilion will no longer store medicinal ingredients at the apothecary. Huantong, take back the components for the young marquess’s medicine. We’ll make it ourselves.”

A courageous auntie from Qingdai Pavilion stepped up. “Young Lord, the young marquess and the third young master are brothers. Third Young Master needs this medicine; can’t the young marquess compromise a bit, as his elder brother?”

“No,” Lin Qingyu said coldly. “Tell the third young master that his ailment will be untreatable for life. He’ll always be a *useless* man.”

The auntie gnashed her teeth, responding in a vaguely threatening tone, “If this is how you’re going to be, Young Lord, then I can only bring your words verbatim to the third young master and the lady. Once the lady enters the palace, she’ll relay this to Concubine Lu as well.”

Lin Qingyu laughed coldly. “Then you’d better remember to tell her every single word.”

Back at Lanfeng Pavilion, Huantong went to the small kitchen to brew the medicine. When Lin Qingyu entered the bedroom, Lu Wancheng was already sitting up.

Right now, it was difficult for Lu Wancheng even to get out of bed. He had told the carpenter to build a small square table that he could place atop the bed, and now he hunched over that small table, drawing something. His hands trembled violently, and he had to steady his right wrist with his left hand to continue drawing.

When he saw that Lin Qingyu had returned, Lu Wancheng put down the brush and smiled. “Ah, my laopo is back.”

Lin Qingyu didn’t know what to say.

In Great Yu, “laopo” referred to an old woman. Lin Qingyu truly had no idea why Lu Wancheng wanted to call him that, but he knew that Lu Wancheng didn’t mean anything bad by it. On the contrary, he seemed oddly happy each time he used the term, so perhaps “laopo” had a different meaning in Lu Wancheng’s homeland—something like “good friend.”

Remembering how half dead Lu Wancheng had looked when the poison in his medicine took effect, Lin Qingyu had secretly decided to allow Lu Wancheng to call him “laopo” occasionally. “Have you seen Zhang Shiquan already?”

“Yes, he came in.”

“What did he say to you?”

Lu Wancheng let out a muffled cough. “He just offered a simple greeting.”

Sitting by the bed, Lin Qingyu saw that Lu Wancheng had drawn an odd symbol on a piece of paper: a circle with a curve inside, and another small circle within that curve, like an eye. “What is this?”

Instead of answering, Lu Wancheng asked, “Qingyu, do you know what people trying to replace someone have in common?”

Lu Wancheng had told him this before. “They’re tawdry.”

“That’s one thing,” Lu Wancheng agreed. “On top of that, those people all eventually fall for one of the replacements. They’ll be lovesick, but since the other person will be unattainable, they’ll chase after them desperately, begging forgiveness. Those replacements often have surnames like Shen, Chu, Bai, Xie…”

Lin Qingyu was glad that Lu Wancheng had met him. Other than Lin Qingyu himself, who could have understood those random words? “So Xiao Cheng will genuinely fall in love with one of his ‘replacements’?”

Lu Wancheng smiled. “You’re so smart.”

“Shen, Chu, Bai… Shen *Huaishi*?” Lin Qingyu recalled.

“How did you know?” Lu Wancheng asked, shocked.

“You’ve written that name before.”

Lu Wancheng groaned. “You really are too smart,” he exclaimed.

“Then who is this Shen Huaishi?” Lin Qingyu asked. “A lady-in-waiting in the Eastern Palace?”

“No. He’s a man—one of Xiao Cheng’s shadow guards.” Lu Wancheng stared at the symbol, his lips white as the paper he’d drawn it on. “He often stays by Xiao Cheng’s side, but hidden. Actually, he might already have seen us.”

Noticing signs that the toxic medicine was working within Lu Wancheng, Lin Qingyu said calmly, “Let’s not talk about this right now. Lie down and rest.”

Just then, an argument abruptly broke out outside.

“Eldest Young Master needs to rest quietly. Please return, Third Young Master.”

“Move aside!”

“If you insist on forcing your way in, Third Young Master, this humble servant can only—ah!”

Lin Qingyu stood. “It’s Lu Qiaosong. He must be here for the fleeceflower root.”

Lu Wancheng continued to cough, his complexion even paler.

Lin Qingyu was about to call someone to chase Lu Qiaosong away, but he’d already barged inside. Eyes dark with anger, Lin Qingyu blocked Lu Qiaosong’s view of Lu Wancheng’s bed. “Leave.”

Lu Qiaosong’s unhealthily contorted face showed no trace of his past carefreeness. Even his personality had become twisted. He pointed at Lu Wancheng with a cold smile, declaring, “In his condition, medicine is useless, no matter how much he drinks! What right does he have to contest me? Can *he* give the family an heir?!”

Lin Qingyu no longer wanted to pay him any attention. “Servants!” he called.

Huantong hurried in with a few manservants. “Young Master!”

“Drag him out.”

Lu Qiaosong’s arms were both being held; still, he refused to leave, glaring at Lin Qingyu. “Lu Wancheng is a half-dead corpse. How much longer can you be this arrogant? Once he dies, what kind of sway will you—a widowed male wife—have? When that happens, I’ll sell you to the Bureau of Entertainment and let all the men in the empire play with you. Then, at least, you won’t waste your pretty face!”

Lin Qingyu tried hard to suppress the malice erupting within his heart. He just needed to have this person removed, since Lu Wancheng needed rest. He could find time to settle everything else with Lu Qiaosong after Lu Wancheng fell asleep.

“Qingyu, I-I don’t feel good. Qingyu…” Lu Wancheng called his name weakly. Suddenly, he grunted, and crimson blood spilled from between his lips.

“Young Marquess!” Huantong yelled.

In that instant, Lin Qingyu’s anger exploded. He grabbed Lu Qiaosong’s collar roughly and slammed him against a pillar. “You’re dead.”

Chapter 35

ALTHOUGH LU WANCHENG had always been severely ill, he'd rarely had desperate moments under Lin Qingyu's meticulous care, and he'd certainly never spit up blood before. Lin Qingyu couldn't save Lu Wancheng's life, but he could at least help him go with dignity, clean and conscious.

Dirty things like blood shouldn't soil his body.

When Lu Wancheng vomited his first mouthful of blood, his toxic medication seemed to flip a switch within his body. More and more blood gushed from his mouth, instantly staining his clothes and bedsheets, and Lu Wancheng himself fainted.

"Young Master!" Hualu wailed. "Young Master, please don't scare me…!"

"Wh-what do we do, Young Lord?!"

No one in Lanfeng Pavilion had ever seen anything like this. Everyone scrambled in panic, waiting for Lin Qingyu to take control of the situation.

After his head hit the pillar, Lu Qiaosong was immediately pulled to his knees by servants, completely devoid of his dignity as a young master. Seeing so much blood reminded him of his past self atop that singer, and he roared in anger.

"See that, Lin Qingyu?!" he shouted, eyes bloodred and bulging with rage. "Your husband has thrown up enough blood to kill him! Even if you possess all the medical skills in the world, even if you use all the thousand-year fleeceflower root that exists, you still can't save him!"

Lin Qingyu glared at him and suddenly let out a short, quiet laugh. The sound was bone-chilling; paired with his face, it made him seem like a demon, and it sent shivers down everyone's spine.

By the time Lu Qiaosong returned to his senses, he had already been *escorted* outside by Lanfeng Pavilion's servants. The curtain behind the bed was lowered as well, providing only a view of shadows moving beyond.

Lin Qingyu worked until midnight, finally nursing Lu Wancheng to the point that he would survive. The servants wiped off the blood on the young marquess's body, changed him into clean clothes, and provided fresh bedding. All the while, Lu Wancheng slept quietly, purely, as if he felt no pain at all.

Lin Qingyu watched over him for a time. Then, Lady Liang's courtyard sent someone to say that the marchioness wanted the young lord to pay a visit.

Lu Qiaosong had run to Lanfeng Pavilion, kicked up a giant fuss, and so enraged his severely ill older brother that he'd vomited blood. This was a huge debacle within the manor, and even the marquess was informed. After hearing the entire story, he fumed, "Where is that unfilial son now?!"

At that point, Lady Liang no longer tried to falsify or deny anything. She stepped back and sobbed, "Marquess, you know that Wancheng is ill—but do you remember that Qiaosong is ill too?"

"How can his illness compare to Wancheng's?! He's well aware that his brother is severely ill, but he still rushed to Lanfeng Pavilion to make trouble and disrespect

him. Should he not be punished?"

"Of course he should be—only, after Qiaosong was thrown out of Lanfeng Pavilion, he fainted too. The physician says that his body is weak, and that he should take care not to get angry, as it's harmful to his liver. In unpleasant terms, Wancheng is…already in such bad shape. Will you really punish Qiaosong while he's ill and thus worsen that illness?!" Lady Liang wiped her tears, observing the marquess's expression in her peripheral vision. "You may not know this, but Qiaosong just found a cure for his unspeakable illness. He's eager to restore his health and produce an heir; he was only rude to his sister-in-law out of rashness. If you wish to punish him, then as his mother, I have nothing to say. I only…I only beg that you wait until his health is a bit less poor…"

In the marquess's mind, his lack of heirs was always a major issue. Once he heard Lady Liang claim that Lu Qiaosong's shameful condition could be cured, he couldn't help wavering on his decision. "Is that true?"

Lady Liang nodded quickly. "I wouldn't dare lie to you."

Lin Qingyu watched them coldly. He just felt like these two were wasting his time.

The marquess glanced at him. "Never mind. Let the two of them rest well for now. We can discuss everything else at a later date."

As soon as Lin Qingyu walked through the gate of the marchioness's courtyard, Huantong rushed over. "Young Master, what did the marquess say?"

Lin Qingyu sneered. "You're still counting on him?"

Huantong couldn't believe it. "But Third Young Master angered the young marquess to the point that he vomited blood! How can that just be dismissed?"

"Enough," Lin Qingyu said. "Find Zhang Shiquan for me."

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Lu Wancheng slept three days before waking again.

Although Lu Qiaosong was spared punishment, the marquess of Nan'an warned him not to approach Lanfeng Pavilion again to keep him from disturbing his brother's health. In addition, the marquess ordered a steward to go to the markets and find thousand-year fleeceflower root to buy for Lu Qiaosong's medicine.

Lu Qiaosong consumed expensive medicine as if he were simply eating dinner. Although the manor spent egregious sums of money, he still didn't recover. At that point, he belatedly realized that the wandering physician might've tricked him. In a burst of anger, Lu Qiaosong locked the physician up in the woodshed, threatening to cut the man's hands off if he couldn't think of another solution, so that he couldn't even beg for money in the future.

Whether because his brain worked better under pressure, or for some other reason, the wandering physician really did come up with another prescription, and he said with confidence that it would certainly work this time. Lu Qiaosong still doubted him, but he ordered the pills to be made. After taking a few, he truly felt changes in his condition. His spirits lifted, his entire body grew hot, and his torso and legs regained strength. Lu Qiaosong was overjoyed; he believed that his unspeakable

condition would be cured in no time.

Lady Liang was also elated. The son of the marquess's first wife would die soon; furthermore, Lady Liang's daughter was the crown prince's concubine. If her son's illness could be cured, and he could produce an heir, then the marchioness's life would be perfect.

There was only one thing that worried her a bit. Obviously, she had sent a message to the Eastern Palace to tell Lu Niantao about the situation in the manor, but she had yet to receive a reply. Thus, Lady Liang prepared a generous gift and sent it to the eunuch who facilitated contact between her and her daughter. But the eunuch threw the messenger out, leaving him with one cold sentence: "The marquess of Nan'an has raised such a good daughter."

Upon hearing this, Lady Liang was frantic with worry, but she couldn't find out what exactly had happened. She had only lived a few days in glory when the shadow of anxiety settled over her again. Lady Liang didn't know how "good" Lu Niantao was, but Lin Qingyu sure did. Hu Ji had given the word that Lin Qingyu's poison had taken effect.

A few days earlier, Xiao Cheng had suddenly begun to have migraines. He felt like his head was splitting open; he seemed to be going deaf; even his eyes hurt. He would've smashed his head against a wall if he could. All the imperial physicians gathered in the Eastern Palace, but they couldn't find the migraines' trigger, even after half a day. Noble Consort Chen ordered everything in the palace examined, from the food and water they consumed to the clothes they wore. Not a single detail was spared, and yet nothing was found.

Then Noble Consort Chen's stewardess asked whether, since the problem wasn't in the crown prince's palace, it might be in some other palace.

Thus, the palace where the two concubines lived was also thoroughly searched. The incense that Lu Niantao burned there was found, but when the imperial physicians checked it, they found nothing wrong with it. However, Xiao Cheng was a naturally suspicious person. Although the imperial physicians said the incense was innocuous, the crown prince still forbade those in the Eastern Palace to use incense anymore.

Xiao Cheng wasn't dumb—the same tactics would never work twice on him—so Lin Qingyu knew that Lu Niantao was basically no longer useful. In light of that, he had to squeeze out every last bit of her value.

Imperial Physician Hu had always been extremely loyal to Lin Qingyu's father, and he'd helped them with so much. It was time for Lin Qingyu to repay him.

No one could find the reason for the crown prince's migraines; not a single physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians could do anything to help. No one could have predicted that in the end, Hu Ji—who'd only recently joined the department—would pinpoint the cause.

There *was* truly nothing wrong with the incense the crown prince's concubine had been using. Combined with the Pursuing Phoenix and Plum and Willow blends, however, it produced inflammation, a side effect that triggered migraines easily.

Pursuing Phoenix and Plum and Willow were unique incense blends used by the empress and by Noble Consort Chen, respectively. The crown prince went to Fengyi Palace and Changle Palace every day to pay respects, and occasionally he visited the concubines at night. Over time, that made his affliction worse and worse.

After Hu Ji revealed the truth, Noble Consort Chen grew furious. Remembering that the marquess of Nan'an was connected to the empress through marriage, Noble Consort Chen believed that the empress had deliberately goaded Lu Niantao into doing this. She called Lu Niantao a "bitch" on the spot and slapped her across the face. If Xiao Cheng hadn't ultimately stopped her, Noble Consort Chen would have escalated the incident to the emperor himself.

In the Eastern Palace, Lu Niantao cried until she was a mess, screaming shrilly that she hadn't known about the incense's effects—she only used that blend because His Highness liked it.

Xiao Cheng knew that she was telling the truth. Lu Niantao could depend only on the Eastern Palace to help her and her mother, so she had no reason to harm Xiao Cheng. Besides, Xiao Cheng had already struggled too much to gain the title of crown prince, and he didn't want to alienate the marquess of Nan'an before talking the throne.

Seeing that Concubine Lu hadn't done this intentionally, and taking into account the marquess's pride, Xiao Cheng kept the event very quiet. He only told Lu Niantao to move out of the concubines' palace. After that, Lady Liang never heard from her daughter again.

Lu Niantao had completely lost the crown prince's heart. She would never have another chance. If Xiao Cheng died, she would be a widow in the palace for the rest of her life. If he survived and became the emperor, she would be nothing more than a discarded concubine in the Cold Palace.[27]

She couldn't blame anyone else. From the beginning, all this had been her own choice.

Meanwhile, Hu Ji—young but extremely skilled—earned the praise of the crown prince and Noble Consort Chen. He became a rising star of the Department of Imperial Physicians, and his future was bright and limitless.

Lin Qingyu knew everything about the event in the Eastern Palace, but when he spoke of it to Lu Wancheng, he only mentioned the first part: that Xiao Cheng had begun to have migraines, and the imperial physicians had no idea what to do. The longer such a mystery remained unsolved, the harder the malady would be to cure.

"Then I don't have to take that medicine anymore, do I?" Lu Wancheng asked. "The poison really hurts."

Lin Qingyu's chest felt tight. "If you don't want to, then don't."

Lu Wancheng looked at him for a while, then smiled. "This was a beautiful operation worthy of a great reward. Hualu."

Hualu carried over a carved redwood box. It had five layers and eight drawers of varying sizes. On top was a handle, and sturdy fabric ropes were threaded through holes on the sides. This was a medicine chest that a physician could carry on his back while out doing his work.

In one unremarkable corner of the box, Lu Qingyu noticed a strange symbol. It was the same one that Lu Wancheng had drawn before.

"I had the carpenter make this according to my blueprints," Lu Wancheng said. "In the future, when you join the Department of Imperial Physicians and have to go out to work, carry this box with you."

"Thank you." Lin Qingyu smiled.

Seeing his smile, Lu Wancheng couldn't help asking, "They all say gifts must be repaid, so shouldn't you give me a gift back?"

"What gift do you want?"

Lu Wancheng thought about that seriously, then pretended to look agonized. "Ah—what should I do? I still want to see Physician Lin in his wedding robes."

Lin Qingyu should've known that that would be the answer.

To him, marrying another man and becoming his male wife had been a stain upon his life, even if the person he'd married was now a close friend. Forcing him to wear his wedding robes again would be no less than making him relive that day's humiliation. But if Lu Wancheng really wanted to see it that badly, it wasn't out of the question…

He hadn't yet responded when Lu Wancheng reached out, hoping to touch the long hair dangling in front of Lin Qingyu's chest. Maybe Lu Wancheng's eyes weren't working well; he tried several times to touch the locks, but failed each time.

"Look how distressed you are." Lu Wancheng laughed as if he'd gotten exactly what he wanted. "I was kidding—couldn't you tell?"

"No," Lin Qingyu said quietly. "You're always like this." He could never tell whether Lu Wancheng was joking or not.

Despite saying that he didn't want to, Lu Wancheng still obediently took his medicine on time.

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That night, Lin Qingyu watched Lu Wancheng fall asleep. Suddenly, there were hurried footsteps outside the door, and Hualu darted in, breathing heavily. "Y-Young Lord!"

Lin Qingyu raised a hand, gesturing for her to lower her voice. "What happened?"

Hualu panted, "Third Young Master…is gone."

"What does 'gone' mean?" Lin Qingyu asked.

"Dead!"

"Oh," Lin Qingyu said. He smoothed Lu Wancheng's blankets and said in a soft voice, "I did another bad thing, Wancheng."

Chapter 36

LU QIAOSONG HAD OVERDOSED on medicine and suddenly died.

It had all happened much too quickly. During the day, Lu Qiaosong had still been spirited; he'd felt as though he could move mountains with his bare hands. But that night, blood had spurted from all seven of his orifices, and he'd lost control of his sphincters. He died tragically within Qingdai Pavilion.

Lady Liang couldn't take the shock and fainted as soon as she heard the news. The marquess of Nan'an only took one look at the body in Qingdai Pavilion before stumbling toward the Lu family's ancestral hall. His hair turned fully gray in one night, and he didn't even go to the royal court the next morning. In the end, Lady Pan took care of Lu Qiaosong's funeral proceedings.

Lady Pan had long been prepared for a funeral, but for that of Lu Wancheng. No one could've guessed that Lu Qiaosong would pass away before his elder brother, much less in such a violent manner. Naturally, the funerary items prepared for Lu Wancheng couldn't be used, so Lady Pan had to send someone to buy the equivalent items on short notice, throwing several things together hastily.

Mourning banners hung in the marquess's manor, and paper money flew. Lu Qiaosong's coffin sat in the hall. Lady Liang, dressed in white, knelt in front of the coffin; her gaze was hollow, her expression numb. It seemed as though she had already cried until her tears were dry.

Although Lu Qiaosong's death had been undignified, he was still the marquess's son. He'd had plenty of connections and made friends wherever he went, so there was no lack of mourners. One of them—an unfamiliar man—claimed to be a eunuch from the Eastern Palace, there to prostrate himself to the third young master in Concubine Lu's stead.

Lady Liang's expression finally shifted a bit. "Concubine Lu…" she said in a hoarse, quiet voice. "I-is she all right?"

The man hesitated, but after Lady Liang's repeated questions, he told her that Lu Niantao had been banished to the Cold Palace.

Lady Liang gaped for a long time, but when she spotted Lin Qingyu unexpectedly, she suddenly began to scream. Shaking uncontrollably, she pointed at the young lord. "Demon!" she screeched in a hoarse voice. "A demon has married into the marquess of Nan'an's manor!"

"You must be joking, Lady," Lin Qingyu said coolly. "Weren't you the one who said I was the manor's lucky charm before?"

Lady Liang widened her eyes, as if someone had snatched her by the throat, and she kept repeating odd gibberish to herself. She'd entirely lost her wits. The physician said that she had been driven mad and might never recover.

After these consecutive shocks, the marquess was entirely overwhelmed and fell severely ill. He no longer had the energy to ask about the household, only telling the servants to watch the marchioness closely so that she wouldn't run outside and embarrass the family. He entrusted everything else to Lady Pan.

During the days on which Lu Qiaosong's funeral was held, Lu Wancheng recovered his health slightly, but only to the point that he was awake for slightly longer periods and could talk more.

Upon learning of Lu Qiaosong's sudden death, Lady Liang's insanity, and the marquess's illness, Lu Wancheng wasn't surprised at all. On the contrary, he looked at Lin Qingyu appreciatively. "You seem to have grown even prettier, Qingyu." He was like an extremely poisonous flower that had hidden itself for a long time but finally had a chance to bloom. He was beautiful yet terrifying, causing heart palpitations after a single glance.

Lin Qingyu lowered his head to look at his pristine, flawless hands. When he spoke, his voice seemed a bit accusatory. "You were the one who turned me into this."

Lu Wancheng laughed softly. "It was my honor."

Outside, the shrill sound of a suona reverberated. It was the funeral parlor's employees sending Lu Qiaosong off.

The two men were silent for a while. Suddenly, Lu Wancheng asked, "Qingyu, where do you think Lu Qiaosong will go?"

"After people die, nothing's left of them. Where else could they go?"

"Then do you know how *I* got here?"

Lin Qingyu froze for a moment. "If you didn't tell me, how would I know?"

"One day, I was walking home from school and saved a pregnant woman, but I got myself killed. I'm such a good person!" Lu Wancheng exclaimed.

Lin Qingyu's eyes opened wide. "You mean, you've…died once before?"

Lu Wancheng nodded. "A completely loaded truck ran over me. It hurt a lot, actually." He laughed. "They all say that kindness begets kindness. I saved two lives, so does that mean I get to live twice? Xu Junyuan did calculations for *my* life, and he said that I…might not be meant to die."

Lin Qingyu stood up abruptly, blurting, "What do you mean 'might'?!"

Lu Wancheng couldn't continue pretending to be relaxed. "I mean…maybe," he said with difficulty. "If I die, I might really die and lose everything. Even if I'm lucky enough to wake up, I might not be in Great Yu, or in this world at all. Understand?"

Lin Qingyu stared at Lu Wancheng in shock. After a while, he asked, "How sure are you about that?"

Lu Wancheng was silent for a long time, then said quietly, "I don't know."

Lin Qingyu desperately tried to hold back his emotions. "What the hell *is* all of this?"

Lu Wancheng seemed to have predicted his reaction. "I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. "I felt hesitant for ages, but I thought that I should still tell you."

"Why would you tell me something that isn't certain?!" Lin Qingyu could no longer endure this. He'd already been prepared to lose Lu Wancheng forever, but now Lu Wancheng told him that he "might" live.

What did Lu Wancheng want him to do? Do nothing all day but wonder whether he really had died and wait for an answer that might not even exist?!

If…if, in the end, Lu Wancheng still only had a chance, Lin Qingyu would rather that chance didn't exist.

"Wait a year for me," Lu Wancheng said, but then thought that a year might be too long. He and Lin Qingyu had only known each other for a year, so how could he ask Lin Qingyu to wait another twelve months? "Not a year—" Lu Wancheng broke off in a cough, then continued desperately, "Half a year… No, just a hundred days." He was still afraid that Lin Qingyu would reject his request as too much. "If I haven't come to find you within a hundred days, just assume that I'm entirely dead. But we can make a secret code, and if I don't die—if my soul transmigrates into someone else—we can find each other using that code, okay?"

Lin Qingyu's mouth tasted bitter, and his emotions were a tangled mess. "Lu Wancheng, you're no better than a swine," he grated from between his teeth.

Lu Wancheng forced a smile. "Every other beauty insults their husband by calling them a bastard. Then Physician Lin comes along and calls me a *swine* right off the bat. As I'd expect of my laopo."

"Fuck off."

"I can't, Qingyu," Lu Wancheng whined shamelessly. "My legs are useless."

Not only were Lu Wancheng's legs useless, all his internal organs were damaged too. Every day, his poisonous medicine took effect, and every day, he became delirious with pain, knowing only how to call Lin Qingyu's name.

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes. "Say it."

Lu Wancheng blinked. "Say what?"

"The secret code."

A smile slowly bloomed on Lu Wancheng's face. "Let me think."

This secret code needed to roll off the tongue, be easy to remember, and be unknown to anyone else. After a spell of deep consideration, Lu Wancheng said, "All right… 'If odd, change; if even, remain the same; and the sign depends on the quadrant name.'"

"And what exactly is that?" Lin Qingyu asked coldly. "Can't you say something I'll understand?"

"If you don't understand, you can ask what it means. I'll tell you."

So Lin Qingyu did ask, "What did that thing you just said mean? What do you mean by 'laopo'? And what's a 'kink'?"

Lu Wancheng automatically ignored the last two questions. "We must begin with the basic definitions of the trigonometric functions…"

As he explained, animated, he suddenly frowned and bit his lip. That was a sign that the poisonous medicine was taking effect.

"I'll get the needles," Lin Qingyu said.

Acupuncture could reduce Lu Wancheng's pain slightly. Its effects were minimal, but it was better than nothing.

Lu Wancheng grabbed Lin Qingyu's sleeve, shaking his head. "No, I don't need it. Just stay here, and be with me."

Lin Qingyu sat on the edge of the bed, letting Lu Wancheng lie in his arms.

Lu Wancheng opened his eyes as wide as he could, staring at the air in front of him, his fingers digging into Lin Qingyu's arm even as he smiled. "Qingyu, the secret code… Did you -memorize it?"

Lin Qingyu's hand covered Lu Wancheng's eyes. "I did."

"You really only need to wait a hundred days…" Lu Wancheng closed his eyes under Lin Qingyu's palm. "Don't wait too long. I'd worry about you."

***

After the first day of winter was the Day of Lesser Snow.[28] This year, snow came much later than usual, but the sky was always gray and cloudy, as if the heavens weren't sure either whether it would snow.

Lu Wancheng woke up less and less often, and even his rare moments of consciousness were brought on by the pain from his toxic medicine. In the past, he'd been able to sit in his wheelchair and enjoy the sunshine in the yard, but he couldn't even sit up in bed now. He couldn't go anywhere outside his bed, either.

At the end of the month, Lin Qingyu's mother turned forty, and her eldest son paid a visit to the family's manor. Seeing him arrive alone, Lady Lin knew that Lu Wancheng's condition wasn't promising. She was afraid that her son would be sad, so she didn't ask much. Instead, it was Lin Qinghe who asked why Wancheng-gege hadn't come. Lin Qingyu just patted his head and said that Wancheng-gege would come next time.

Lady Lin preferred peace and quiet over a noisy celebration; besides, her husband was away. Thus, she simply told the servants to make dishes that her sons liked and spent a quiet birthday with her children. Looking at the gloomy sky outside, she told them, "When the first snow falls, your father should be coming home."

Lin Qingyu was afraid to leave the marquess's manor for too long, so he returned after eating lunch with his mother. Back in Lanfeng Pavilion, Lin Qingyu saw Hualu watering a bare osmanthus tree while humming a tune. "What happened to make you so happy?"

Ever since Lu Wancheng vomited blood, worry and sadness had loomed over Lanfeng Pavilion. It had been a long time since he'd seen Hualu so carefree.

"Young Master just woke up!" Hualu exclaimed, thrilled. "He's in great spirits today, and he can even sit up on his own. He ate half a bowl of porridge by himself, and he even asked me to change him into a lucky red outfit. Does this mean Young Master is getting better, Young Lord?"

Lin Qingyu froze, his heart dropping out of his chest.

Chapter 37

LIN QINGYU APPROACHED the bedroom. Its door was cracked open.

When he'd returned to his family's manor today, he hadn't brought Huantong. So, at this moment, Huantong was kneeling by Lu Wancheng's wheelchair, draping a blanket over the young marquess's legs. Huantong had been with Lin Qingyu for years and had seen a lot, so when he observed that Lu Wancheng seemed unusually spirited, he wasn't overjoyed like Hualu was. Instead, he forced himself to act cheerful as he spoke to Lu Wancheng.

"What do you want for dinner tonight, Young Marquess? I'll tell the kitchen to prepare it in advance."

Lu Wancheng thought about it, then said, "I'd like plum-blossom cake."

"All right," Huantong said hoarsely. "I-I'll go tell them now."

"What time is it?" Lu Wancheng asked, looking toward the wardrobe.

Lin Qingyu followed his gaze, but there was nothing special about the wardrobe.

"Almost five o'clock," Huantong said.

"Why isn't your young master back yet?"

"Young Master should be coming soon. He said he'd return for dinner."

Lu Wancheng continued looking at the wardrobe a bit worriedly. "He should hurry."

Lin Qingyu retreated.

In the garden, Hualu was still humming away, her tune light and airy. She turned to see Lin Qingyu standing in front of the door and asked curiously, "Why aren't you going inside, Young Lord?"

Lin Qingyu returned to his senses. "Hualu, let me borrow your makeup box."

Lin Qingyu had only worn makeup once in his life, on the day he'd married Lu Wancheng. Because heavy makeup didn't suit men, and Lin Qingyu had objected strongly to it anyhow, the matron of honor had only colored his eyebrows and lips and placed an adhesive huadian between his eyebrows.

Lu Wancheng wouldn't care whether Lin Qingyu did his eyebrows or lips. He seemed only to want to see him wearing wedding robes with a huadian.

Looking at his reflection in the copper mirror, Lin Qingyu suddenly discovered that he'd become much thinner recently as well. He picked up the brush and carefully, deliberately recreated the huadian he'd worn between his eyebrows on that day. It had a simple, symmetric design, not more than three brushstrokes, yet it changed his appearance entirely. He no longer seemed like himself, but like a wife who depended on his beauty to make his husband happy.

He'd never known that a man could also use his appearance to make his close friend happy.

Next, he took off his plain clothing and put on each piece of his complicated wedding robes, holding them in place with a jade belt, then covered himself with a

veil. He took off the jade headdress holding his hair up, letting the dark strands spill around him like a waterfall, then picked up his wedding headdress. After a moment of hesitation, he set it back down.

This was enough. He was sending him off, not marrying him for a second time.

"Young Master." Huantong's voice sounded outside. "Young Master, are you back?"

Lin Qingyu had yet to respond when Huantong barged in. The servant immediately froze upon seeing him.

As Lin Qingyu stood up, the trailing fabric of the wedding robes swept the floor. He hadn't pulled his long hair back up, letting it spill naturally down his shoulders. When he lowered his head, his hair blocked half his face from view.

Huantong had never seen his young master like this before. He was so beautiful that no one else could compare, his movements simple yet graceful. The servant stood in a daze until Lin Qingyu walked to him. "Young Master, why…?"

"Where is the young marquess now?"

"The young marquess thought that Young Master hadn't yet returned, so he said he wished to wait in the garden." Huantong remembered why he'd come in, and when he spoke again, his voice was choked. "Young Master, the young marquess—he…"

"I know." Lin Qingyu was oddly calm. "Tell the servants to prepare dinner and leave it. Tonight, no one needs to wait on us."

The wedding robes were heavy and inconvenient; it was extremely easy to step on the skirts and trip. To reach Lu Wancheng quickly, Lin Qingyu had to hold up the skirts like a woman, passing through the silent halls, running to the yard…

Lu Wancheng wore bright-red clothes and a snow-white fox-fur scarf as he sat in the wheelchair that had been empty for a long time. He burst into Lin Qingyu's field of view majestically, like a red plum blossom in the snow.

Tonight, Lu Wancheng was in great spirits. Color had returned to his cheeks and lips, and his eyes sparkled youthfully, as if he'd returned to the warm springtime earlier that year. Back then, Lu Wancheng hadn't even needed the wheelchair. He'd even disregarded his condition to try and lift Lin Qingyu into the air.

If…if Lu Wancheng's shirt hadn't been overly large, if his legs had still been working, then Lin Qingyu might've thought that maybe—just maybe—he really was getting better.

The young marquess just sat there quietly, waiting for him to arrive.

Lin Qingyu opened his mouth. "Wancheng."

Lu Wancheng's reaction was slightly delayed. First, he flinched; then he slowly turned his head to look at Lin Qingyu, a smile appearing on his face. "You're back." His response was no different from usual.

A heavy feeling slammed into Lin Qingyu's chest.

Lu Wancheng had said so many times that he wanted to see Lin Qingyu in wedding robes and a huadian. Why, when Lin Qingyu finally wore them, did he not react in any special way?

Lin Qingyu raised his hand, trying to touch Lu Wancheng's eyes. His fingertips neared the young nobleman's eyelashes. Yet Lu Wancheng's eyes were still open, looking at him unblinkingly, and the corners of his lips lifted in a beautiful smile. "Did you eat Mother-in-Law's homemade plum-blossom cake when you visited your family? Oh, right—and have Qinghe's front teeth grown in yet?"

Lin Qingyu's hand froze in the air and slowly fell. "Yes, and yes."

How did he forget? Lu Wancheng's body was full of poison. Anything he did would be considered normal. How *did* he forget?

"I told Huantong to prepare plum-blossom cakes too," Lu Wancheng said. "Could you eat some with me again?"

Lin Qingyu nodded. When Lu Wancheng called his name again, he responded, "All right. It's cold out. Let me push you back indoors."

Lin Qingyu pushed Lu Wancheng to the main hall. According to the rules that noble families followed, every meal should be taken in the main hall. In the past, Lu Wancheng had been lazy, so he'd told the servants to bring meals to him. Then, as his illness progressed, he couldn't eat much food, even if the servants brought it right to his bed.

Huantong had told the kitchen to prepare a whole table's worth of dishes. As he finished bringing them up, his eyes red-rimmed, Lu Wancheng called out to him, "Is there wine?"

Lin Qingyu didn't allow his patients to drink alcohol. They'd been married for so long, yet they'd never had a drink together. "Given your health, you shouldn't drink wine."

"But I'm already eighteen," Lu Wancheng said.

"It has…" Lin Qingyu took a deep breath and brought out his usual tone. "It has nothing to do with how old you are."

"How can it not? Turning eighteen meant I could do whatever I wanted. But I finally made it to eighteen, and I can't do anything…" Lu Wancheng paused, then laughed. "Just let me have one cup, Physician Lin."

Lin Qingyu steadied his breath and told Huantong, "Bring the wine."

Huantong poured wine for the pair, then said in a low voice, "If you don't need anything else, Young Masters, I'll leave now." He was afraid that he would weep aloud if he stayed any longer.

"If you leave, who will help me eat?" Lu Wancheng asked.

Huantong looked at Lin Qingyu, unsure what to do.

"I will," Lin Qingyu told him.

Lu Wancheng was taken aback, responding with shock. "You'd do that much for me?"

Lin Qingyu lifted a bowl of soup close to Lu Wancheng's lips. "Open your mouth."

Lu Wancheng obediently did so, carefully drinking a mouthful of soup as his head rested against Lin Qingyu's hand. "Another," he said with a satisfied expression.

He hadn't eaten much before he suddenly said he wanted to drink. Huantong had carefully chosen a gentle pear-blossom wine, which had been heated beforehand.

There was no burning sensation with the first mouthful, and the wine's fragrance lingered for a long time. Lu Wancheng took a sip, then let out a satisfied noise. "That's some good wine." But just before, he hadn't even been able to taste his medicine's bitterness anymore.

Lin Qingyu tilted his head away, unable to bear looking at him. He heard Lu Wancheng ask, "Qingyu, when we got married and drank our nuptial wine, was it this kind?" Before Lin Qingyu could answer, he added, "Wait—you didn't drink nuptial wine with the rooster too, did you?"

Lin Qingyu closed his eyes. "I…don't remember."

"I'll assume you drank it with me, then," Lu Wancheng said.

Bringing his emotions under control, Lin Qingyu opened his eyes again. Outside the window, night was fast approaching. Snow had begun to fall quietly and quickly, as pure and white as the moonlight.

It was the first snow of the year.

Joy leaped in Lin Qingyu's heart. He remembered Lu Wancheng saying that he wanted to see Lin Qingyu stand in the snow with an umbrella, the redness of his cheeks enhanced by his robes. "Wancheng, it's snowing outside. Do you want to go…" But the word "see" became stuck in his throat, and he couldn't say it.

"Snowing?" Lu Wancheng's tone was still light, as if he couldn't detect Lin Qingyu's unusual behavior. "Then I'm rather lucky. Come on, let's go see the snow."

Lin Qingyu had already told the servants to stay in their rooms that night. No one saw him wearing bright-red wedding robes and holding an umbrella, his hair falling around him as he stood in the snow.

No one…could see.

Lu Wancheng reached out, letting soft snowflakes land in his palm. Away from the light in the room, his skin rapidly paled, and his lips lost their redness. Only his eyes remained bright, as if he were an ephemeral flower withering rapidly after blooming with all its effort.

…He'd bloomed for too short a time—so short that Lin Qingyu was scared. But he didn't know how to help Lu Wancheng bloom any longer. He could only grasp his frigid hand in vain. "Are you cold?"

Lu Wancheng shook his head, then suddenly asked, "Qingyu, you still like girls, right?"

Lin Qingyu swallowed. "Naturally."

Lu Wancheng nodded and smiled. "That's good." He watched the snow for a bit longer, his eyelids drooping. "Qingyu, I feel tired."

Lin Qingyu's heart seemed empty. "If you're tired, then go to sleep," he said quietly.

Once he fell asleep, he'd be free. He'd no longer have to suffer the agony of the poisonous medicine.

But Lu Wancheng didn't listen to him. He was still obstinately opening his eyes wide, although smiling in apology. "Sorry, Qingyu. I don't think I can…keep holding on. But I tried really hard, so don't be mad at me, okay?"

“Of course not.” Lin Qingyu knelt in the snow, one hand holding the umbrella, the other caressing Lu Wancheng’s cheek. His voice was as gentle as water. “I’m not mad at you.”

Lu Wancheng probably already realized that the events in the Eastern Palace hadn’t gone as smoothly as they’d wished. Right—Lu Wancheng was so smart. He knew everything. How could he not have realized?

Underneath the umbrella, Lu Wancheng smiled and made one last joke: “On the day Xiao Cheng dies tragically, please don’t forget to tell your husband’s picture at the altar.”

Lin Qingyu couldn’t help smiling a bit at that.

Lu Wancheng seemed to have felt his smile. He looked at Lin Qingyu and kept looking at him, until he finally couldn’t hold on any longer, and he closed his eyes. “I’ll sleep for a while, then. Remember to wake me up.”

“All right,” Lin Qingyu said.

The snow fell heavier and heavier.

However warm Lin Qingyu’s hand was, the other man nonetheless slowly, slowly turned cold against the physician’s palm—cold and stiff to the bone.

Moonlight spilled onto them, cold and unforgiving like the wind and snow, muffling the sounds of the world.

And Lin Qingyu was wearing his wedding robes and a huadian, just like he had on the day he and Lu Wancheng first met.

Charac

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

LU WANCHENG □□□: Surname Lu, given name Wancheng. Sickly eldest son of the marquess of Nan'an. Called the "young marquess."

LIN QINGYU □□□: Surname Lin, given name Qingyu. Aspiring physician wedded to Lu Wancheng to ward off the latter's sickness. Extremely skilled in medicine. Called the "young lord."

HOUSEHOLD OF THE MARQUESS OF NAN'AN □□□□

MARQUESS OF NAN'AN □□□: Patriarch of the Lu family. Head of the household.

LADY LIANG □□: Second wife of the marquess. The marchioness.

LU NIANTAO □□□: Second child and only daughter of the marquess. Called the "second young lady."

LU QIAOSONG □□□: Third child and younger son of the marquess. Called the "third young master."

LADY PAN □□: Concubine in the marquess's household.

AUNTIE LIU □□□: Lady Liang's confidant and personal servant.

AUNTIE QIU □□□: Lu Qiaosong's wet nurse.

HUANTONG □□: Lin Qingyu's personal servant.

HUALU □□: Lu Wancheng's personal servant.

ZHANG SHIQUAN □□□: Accountant from Duke Wen's residence.

LIN HOUSEHOLD

LIN RUSHAN □□□: Lin Qingyu's father. Works as head imperial physician in the Department of Imperial Physicians, a fifth-rank role in the royal court.

LIN QINGHE □□□: Lin Qingyu's younger brother.

ROYAL COURT

EMPRESS WEN □□□: Empress of the Great Yu Empire. Lu Wancheng's aunt.

NOBLE CONSORT CHEN □□□: Beloved concubine of the emperor. Mother of Crown Prince Xiao Cheng.

XIAO CHENG □□: Son of Noble Consort Chen. Crown prince of Great Yu.

DUKE WEN □□□: Grandfather of Lu Wancheng. Father of Empress Wen.

XU JUNYUAN □□□/"HALF-IMMORTAL XU" □□□: Imperial preceptor of Great Yu.

HU JI □□: Imperial physician. Head Imperial Physician Lin's student.

MISCELLANEOUS

CHANG YANG □□: Physician and onetime fellow student of Lin Qingyu.

SHEN HUAISHI □□□: Xiao Cheng's shadow guard.

PRINCESS JINGCHUN □□□□: A woman from Great Yu who married into the North Kingdom.

INSTITUTIONS

IMPERIAL MEDICAL ACADEMY □□□: Where aspiring imperial physicians train.

DEPARTMENT OF IMPERIAL PHYSICIANS □□□: Where imperial physicians work. They are responsible for treating members of the royal family, including the emperor.

CHANGSHENG TEMPLE □□□: The most revered temple in the Great Yu Empire. Xu Junyuan practices here.

NAME GUIDE

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

SHIDI: Younger male under same teacher or mentor.

SHIXIONG: Older male under same teacher or mentor.

SHIFU/SHIZUN: Teacher or mentor.

Family

-GEGE: Older brother or older male. Can be used as an affectionate address.

-XIONG: Can refer to older brother or male friend. More respectful and distant than -gege.

-DIDI: Younger brother or younger male. Can be used as an affectionate address.

Other

-GONGZI: Young man from an affluent household.

GLOSSARY

SALTED FISH □□: Modern slang term describing someone unambitious or lazy.

BAZI □□: Eight characters that comprise four pairs denoting the time, date, month, and year of someone's birth. They are used to divine someone's fortune or determine someone's marital compatibility with another person, among other purposes.

WARDING-OFF MARRIAGE □□: A custom popular in Ming- and Qing-era society. A warding-off marriage was initiated to counteract persistent bad luck or sickness. Either the patient himself, or his immediate family, married in hopes that he would regain luck or health.

WEDDING ROBES □□: A bride and groom wear red wedding robes, and the bride wears a red veil. The groom lifts the veil before they solemnize their marriage.

PROSTRATION TO HEAVEN AND EARTH □□: Newlyweds prostrate themselves three times: first to each other, then to their ancestors and parents, and last to heaven and earth.

HUADIAN □□: Ornamental makeup that typically takes the form of a small flower between the eyebrows.

TAKING ONE'S PULSE □□: In traditional Chinese medicine, taking someone's pulse enables the physician to gain a deeper understanding of a patient's ailments and thus give a diagnosis.

"IF ODD, CHANGE; IF EVEN, REMAIN THE SAME; AND THE SIGN DEPENDS ON THE QUADRANT NAME." □□□□□□□□□□□□: A mnemonic rhyme for students studying basic trigonometry.

Characte

Lin Qingya

Lu Wanlong

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] The fifth of twelve hours in traditional timekeeping.

[2] Year twenty of a six-decade cycle once used to track time.

Chapter 2

[3] Euphemism for homosexuality, especially between males.

Chapter 3

[4] In traditional Chinese medicine, the effects of “nourishing” ingredients include stimulating qi. Such ingredients aren’t considered an appropriate treatment for every patient.

Chapter 6

[5] Two herbs that are difficult to distinguish.

Chapter 8

[6] A term used to describe a character in popular media, usually female, who remains beautiful after suffering through battle or injuries.

Chapter 9

[7] In modern media, kidney deficiency can imply sexual or erectile dysfunction.

Chapter 10

[8] A traditional unit of distance. About half a kilometer.

Chapter 13

[9] From Essential Formulas Worth a Thousand in Gold for Emergencies, written during the Tang dynasty by physician Sun Simiao.

Chapter 14

[10] Lit in front of an ancestor’s spirit tablet to demonstrate respect and veneration.

Chapter 15

[11] From Romance of the Three Kingdoms, written during the Ming dynasty by novelist Luo Guanzhong.

[12] “Xiongdi.”

Chapter 16

[13] A formal term for one’s wife.

Chapter 17

[14] Poetry genre that emerged during the Song dynasty. Characterized by lyricism and personal expression.

[15] Lyrics from the theme song of a TV adaptation of Journey to the West.

Chapter 18

[16] “Wearing a green hat” is slang for “being cuckolded.”

Chapter 19

[17] From “Song of Hawthorn: Lantern Festival,” written during the Song dynasty by poet Ouyang Xiu.

Chapter 21

[18] Lyrics from the theme song of the 1992 TV drama New Legend of Madame White Snake. Often used dramatically to express abject sorrow.

Chapter 22

[19] From “In Response to Liu Chaisang,” written during the Six Dynasties by poet Tao Yuanming.

Chapter 23

[20] Dazhuang means “big and strong.”

Chapter 24

[21] Written about Imperial Concubine Yang during the Tang dynasty by poet Bai Juyi.

Chapter 26

[22] Guards for the nobility. Skilled at hiding.

Chapter 32

[23] From “Farewell to My Wife,” written during the Western Han dynasty by diplomat Su Wu.

[24] From “Poem of Seven Sorrows,” written during the Three Kingdoms period by poet Cao Zhi.

Chapter 33

[25] A loving term for one’s husband.

[26] A loving term for one’s wife.

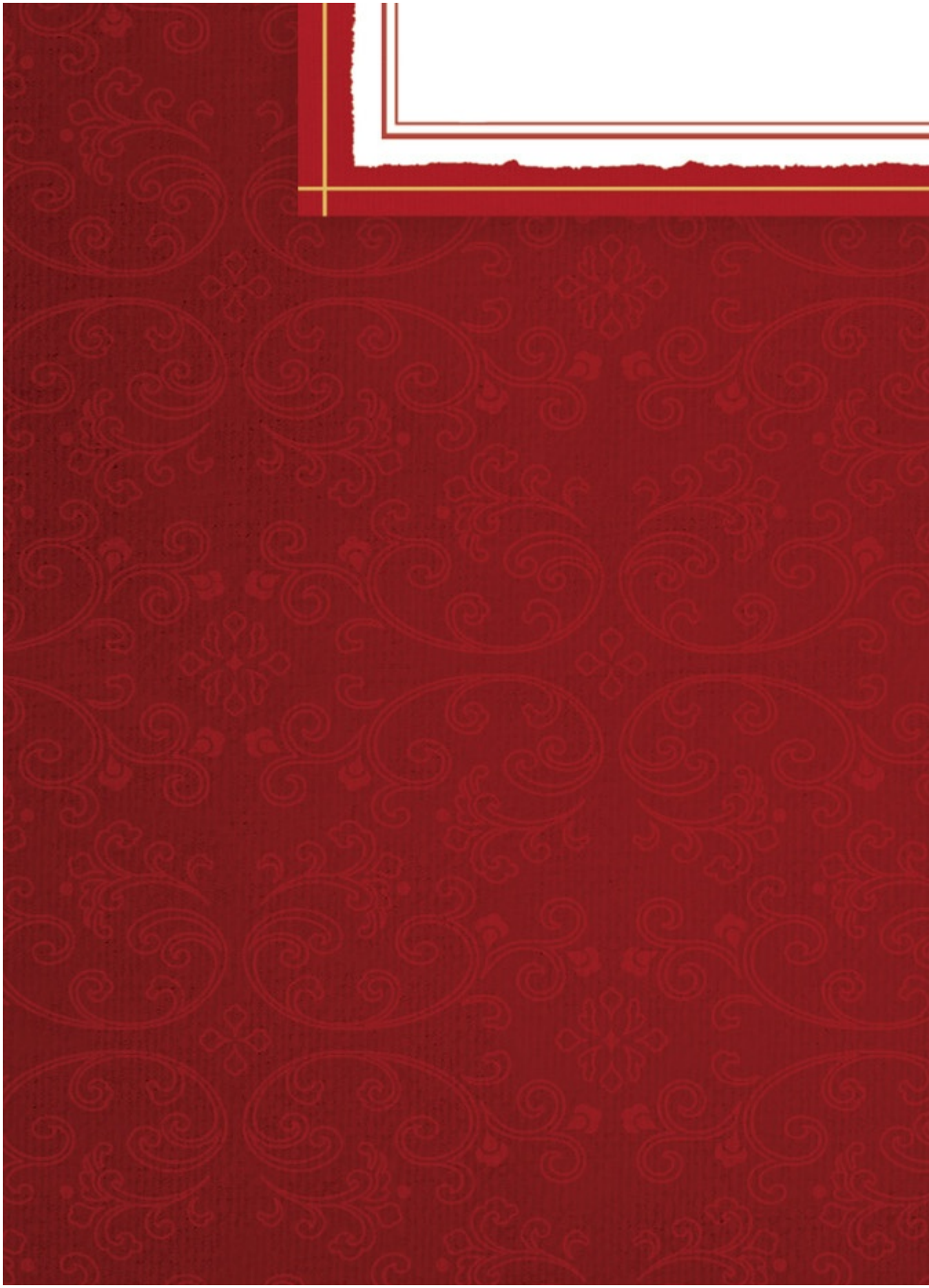
Chapter 35

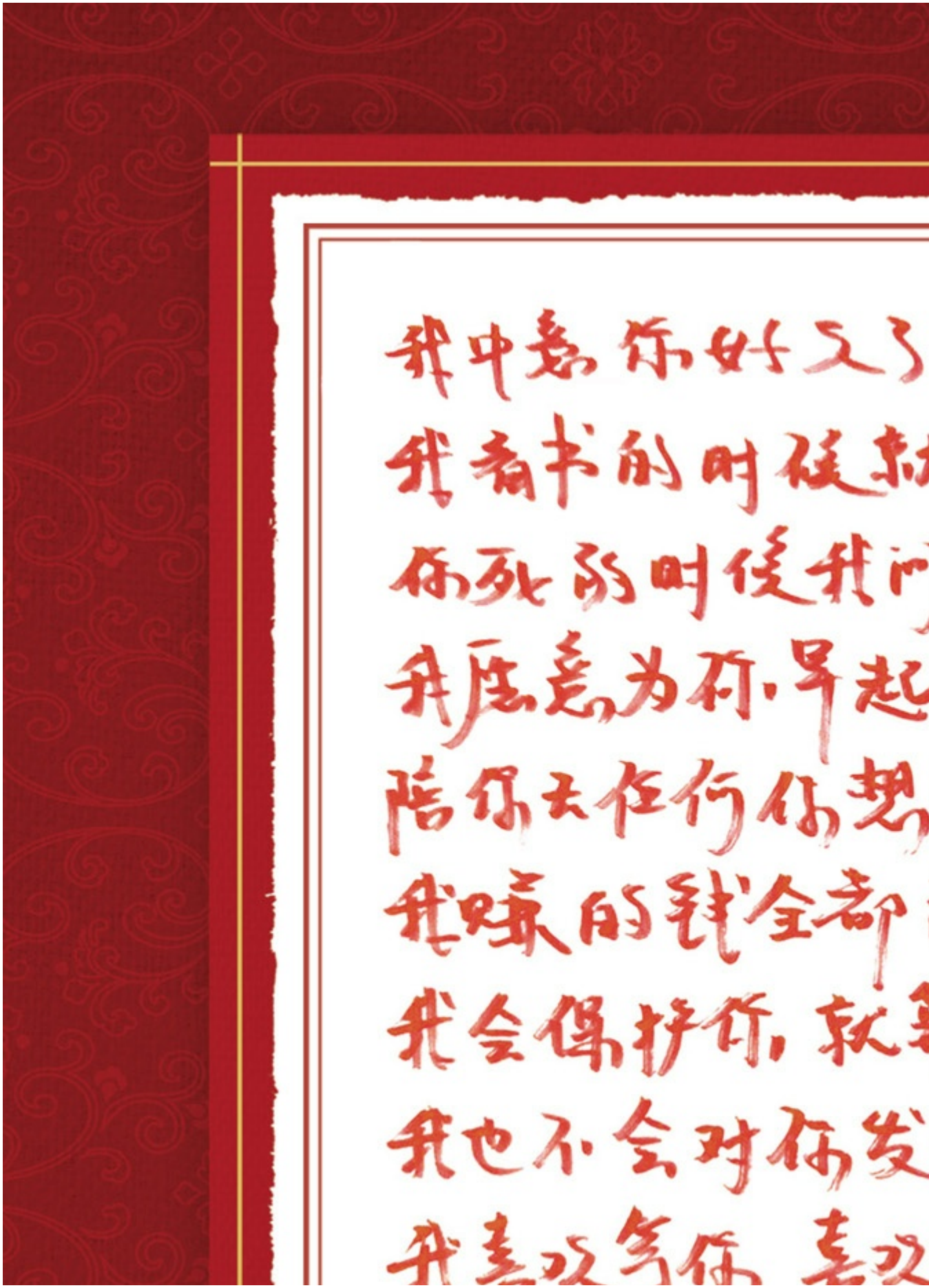
[27] A catch-all term for the isolated, ill-kept side palaces where out-of-favor consorts were sent to live.

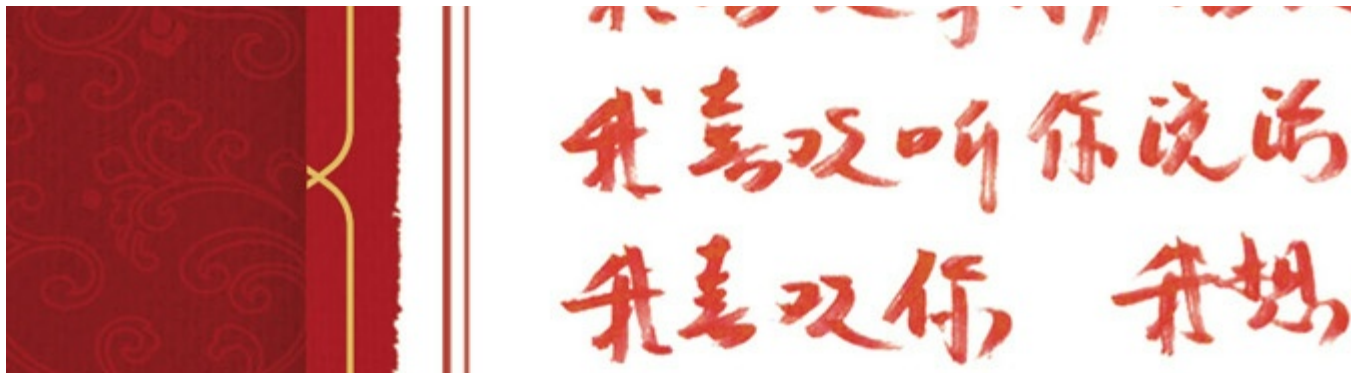
Chapter 36

[28] A period in late November when light snow typically falls during the day, melting at night.

他的愿
永
从十七岁
His wish, from the
until forever, is for







I've liked you for so long.
I already liked you when I re
and when you died I cursed t
For you, I'm willing to wake
and no matter where you wa
I'll give you all the money I e
and even if you wake me up i
I won't be mad at you. I like
I like watching you poison so
I like listening to you talk. I
I like you, and I want to be to

Till Death

Ten years of exha
nights have suddenly
for aspiring Imperial
the midst of his educ
everything aside and
sickly son of the mar
this union will heal t
young master.

However, Lin Qin
Lu Wancheng isn't j
In fact, the man has
that could help Lin Q

that could help Lin Q
even royalty. Thus, L
idea to his new male b
Lin Qingyu back hor
and fulfill his dreams.

Yet as feelings bloo
a dark truth threatens
in both sickness and i

THE FAN-FAVORITE DANMEI ABOUT AN UNASSUMING NOBLEMAN AND HIS TREACHEROUS MALE BRIDE MAKES ITS ENGLISH DEBUT!

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